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## Katharine Susannah Prichard's Coonardoo : an historical study

Marion V. Austin-Crowe  
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**KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD'S**  
***COONARDOO*: AN HISTORICAL STUDY**

by

Marion Virginia W. Austin-Crowe, B.A. Hons.

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the  
Requirements for the Award of

Master of Arts

at the Faculty of Arts, Department of English

Edith Cowan University

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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this thesis is Katharine Susannah Prichard's novel, *Coonardoo* (1929), and its capacity to provide a framework for the reconstruction of the historical situation in the North-West region of Western Australia during the period mid-1860s to late 1920s. The thesis has a dual purpose: to contextualise the novel in terms of the historical, political, ideological, and social situation; and to read the novel in ways which reveal its reconstruction of the wider historical context.

My approach is a new historicist close reading of the text. Specific events or situations are scrutinised for their power to convey insights into the extra-textual situation. For example, the textualisation of the relationship between the white hero and the Aboriginal heroine leads to an exploration of attitudes to interracial sexual encounters in the period of the novel and in the author's contemporary milieu.

Included in this work is an exposition of the various industries which contributed substantially to the economic development of the North-West region. These are treated in some depth in relation to their historical circumstances but with particular reference to textual events and situations.

An important area of discussion is the social and economic situation which developed between the European settlers in the North-West and the indigenous population of the region. Particular reference is made to the displacement, subjugation and diaspora of the region's Aboriginal population.



The pre-contact cultural and religious practices of the Aborigines of the North-West region, and the extent to which these patterns survived into the author's contemporary period, is investigated in the thesis. An appraisal is made of the author's claim that during her visit to the North-West in 1926, she directly observed the Aboriginal traditional forms represented in *Coonardoo*.

Prichard's own socio-cultural and ideological position is explored in relation to the Aboriginal dimension in the novel. Especially relevant is the author's adherence to the theory of Social Darwinism and to the view, prevalent in her society, that the extinction of the Aborigines was imminent and inevitable.

Prichard's novel is the starting point of an investigation into the social, economic and political background of the North-West region during the first sixty years of white settlement. The task of this thesis is to 'recover' the wider historical situation by reference to documents, journals, memoirs and newspapers of the period.

**Declaration**

**I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.**

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### **A New Historicist Approach to *Coonardoo***

This work undertakes a new historicist exploration of Katharine Susannah Prichard's novel, *Coonardoo* (1929). In particular it scrutinises the author's construction of the novel's setting in the North-West region of Western Australia during the period mid-1860s to late 1920s. The task of this thesis is the identification and explication of textual events and situations which are constituted by, and are constitutive of, the wider historical context.

At the outset it should be noted that this thesis does not undertake a literary critical appraisal of the novel but performs a descriptive and evaluative reading of the text in relation to the historical background. For example, although a psychoanalytical exploration of the hero's treatment of the novel's heroine, *Coonardoo*, based on textual evidence offered an interesting line of investigation, this exploration had to be rejected in favour of a detailed account of the historical situation in which such rejections were frequently the fate of Aboriginal concubines.

A new historicist reading of *Coonardoo* is not inappropriate in view of the author's claim to the authenticity of the novel's subject matter. In the 1929 'Foreword to first edition' (referred to as 'Introduction' in the body of this work), Prichard stated that: 'Facts, characters, incidents have been collected, related and interwoven. That is all'. (Prichard, 1929, p.v). Prichard made much of her first-hand experience of the environments and industries which were portrayed in her fiction. In her autobiography, *Child of the Hurricane* (1963), she recalled that she had visited the timberlands of the south-west before commencing on *Working Bullocks* (1926); that she had travelled with

Wirth's circus before commencing on *Haxby's Circus* (1930); and that her visit to a cattle station in the North-West in 1926 had been the starting point of *Coonardoo*. (Prichard, 1963, p. 254).

In a letter to Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Prichard acknowledged that her fiction was intended to be both factual and informative. She wrote: 'My work has been, chiefly, I think, knowing the Australian people and interpreting them to themselves'. (Drake-Brockman, 1953, p. 214). In her essay, 'Some perceptions and aspirations' (1968), Prichard emphasised the realist nature of her fiction when she wrote:

The specific contribution Australian writers can make to world literature is an Australian view of places, people, traditions and customs, manners and ideas, in all their variations.... I have tried to be direct, graphic and clear-sighted in my telling of the way men and women live and work in the forests, back country and cities of Australia. (Prichard, 1968, p. 244).

Thus, Prichard made a specific claim to social realism in her fiction. But this thesis will show that this was not a straightforward task and that, particularly in relation to the construction of *Coonardoo*, the author was constrained by a number of conditions emanating from the material conditions of the time. For example, ideological beliefs coloured her portrayal of the Aborigines, and social and political factors restrained her uninhibited documenting of the working relations between pastoralists and Aboriginal station hands.

Prichard's own situation is discussed in relation to the production of *Coonardoo*. Particular reference is made to the author's economic and socio-political circumstances obtaining during the period. Prichard's affiliation with the Communist Party of Australia and her affinity to Marxist doctrine is only briefly discussed in the thesis as this is not such an important issue in relation to *Coonardoo* which, of all Prichard's novels, is considered to be the 'least ideologically convinced'. (Arthur, 1984, p. 43).

As already stated, the subject of this thesis is the reconstruction of Prichard's *Coonardoo* in respect of its text, context and production; and the investigative procedure adopted is the multi-faceted approach of new historicism.

As a literary theoretical movement, the new historicist approach to the interpretation of literature had already become a recognised literary practice by the beginning of the 1980s. At this time it rather belatedly received its name from its founder, Stephen Greenblatt. Greenblatt explained that in 1982 he had been desperate to discover an umbrella term for a collection of Renaissance essays he was editing for *Genre*. Finally, he had declared they represented a 'new historicism'. (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 1).

Greenblatt claimed to be 'quite giddy with amazement' (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 1) at the speed with which the new historicist theoretical movement came into being and with the stir it caused in the academic world. New historicism, stated H. Aram Veesser, in the Introduction to *The New Historicism* (1989), gave 'scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature and economics'. (Veesser, 1989, p. ix). New historicists moved into these disciplines freely appropriating their methods and materials in pursuit of their own investigative projects.

But the new movement has encountered some opposition from within academia. Resistance has come from history departments, amongst others, and perhaps not least, from within the realm of English language and literature. J. Hillis Miller, in his Presidential Address 1986 to the M.L.A. deplored the turn towards history and away from theory. He stated:

As everyone knows, literary study in the past few years has undergone a sudden, almost universal turn away from theory in the sense of an orientation toward language as such and has made a corresponding turn toward history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context... conditions of production, technology, distribution, and consumption of 'cultural products', among other products. (Miller, 1987, p. 283).



Professor Miller recognised that the turning away from theory was a consequence of an overwhelming desire to engage with realities and concerns that are important for society and a reluctance to engage in a struggle with 'theoretical abstractions and barbarous words about language'. (Miller, 1987, p. 283). He sympathised with the 'motives behind this change' but not when it 'took the form of an exhilarating experience of liberation from the obligation to read, carefully, patiently with nothing taken for granted beforehand'. (Miller, 1987, p. 283).

New historicist, Louis Adrian Montrose, in his essay 'Professing the Renaissance: the poetics and politics of culture' (1989), took issue with Miller's view of unrestrained new historicist practice. Montrose stated that it was an oversimplification to oppose the linguistic against the social. That to do so was to ignore the points of contact between the two concepts. Montrose noted:

any claim for what Miller calls an 'orientation to language *as such*'... is itself - always already - an orientation to language that is being produced from a position *within* 'history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions'. (Montrose, 1989, pp. 16-17).

The emphasis on the socio-cultural context in new historicist interpretations of literary works, in no way obviates the need for patient and careful reading. Indeed, this is a fundamental requirement in its investigative practice. In the preparation of this thesis my method of proceeding has been to undertake a close reading of the novel, *Coonardoo*, with a view to fragmenting the text into the component parts which constitute its environmental, social, cultural, political and economic framework. For example, I extracted various references in the text to: marriage, domestic work, drought, uloo, station buildings, cattle, etc. and treated these as separate units. From this purely quantitative analysis it emerged that each of these units could be assigned to at least one of five major themes which together formed the essential structure of the novel.

In this way I have divided the text into five distinct discourses, as follows: the physical geography and environmental conditions which constitute the North-West land division of Western Australia; the ethnographic and anthropological representation of the region's indigenous people; the pastoralisation process; gold exploration and mining; and the pearl-shell fishing industry.

Each theme is treated in the thesis as an autonomous subject with its own distinctive features and situation; both as they are represented in the text and as they occurred in the wider historical context. The sequencing of the themes in the thesis is based on the order in which each theme becomes a significant feature in the text, but tracing an overall chronological progression from pioneering days to the author's contemporary 1928.

H. Aram Veaser noted that the new historicist's approach to the interpretation of texts is to 'seize upon' a particular, often minuscule, event or statement; a surprising coincidence; or a seemingly bizarre practice. This is then re-read using documentary evidence from the text's contemporary situation to reveal 'the behavioural codes, logics, and motive forces controlling a whole society'. (Veaser, 1989, p. xi).

This practice has been a feature of the present work in which a brief statement in the novel can become an entrance into the wider historical context. For example, a great deal of information about social conditions can be extracted from the textual statement that the novel's heroine is 'booked for the island'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 197)<sup>1</sup>. In particular the causes and treatment of contagious diseases in Aborigines.

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<sup>1</sup> An explanation of 'booked for the island' is given in Chapter 5.

Veeser noted that a 'key assumption' of new historicist practice is 'that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature'. (Veeser, 1989, p. xi). The history of the reception of Prichard's novel

very much illustrates this situation. The value accorded to *Coonardoo* as a cultural artefact has been constantly modified over the, almost, 70 years since its first publication in 1928. Late in this year it was accorded the Australian literary establishment's approval when it was awarded equal first-place with Barnard Eldershaw's *A house is built* (1929) in the *Bulletin's* £500 prize novel competition. *Coonardoo's* reception later in the same year, when it was serialised, was so hostile that the *Bulletin* refused texts based on similar subject matter - sexual liaisons between white men and Aboriginal women - for several years thereafter. In its book form, *Coonardoo* appeared in 1929, but received almost no review notices and little public support. Subsequently, from the late 1950s the novel became a high school text in the English Departments of Australian secondary schools. At this stage its value is somewhat ambiguous: being simultaneously a cultural and social artefact. As a cultural artefact it retained its capacity to excite an emotional response particularly in relation to the fate of its Aboriginal heroine. But in the realm of sociology, as an expression of Australia's Aboriginal heritage, it provided students with a far from flattering, or accurate, view of Aboriginality. In the 1990s the novel has been re-issued in paperback as an example of Australian women's writing.

In the present work *Coonardoo* becomes the basis of an interdisciplinary project which utilises the text as an entrance into the historical context it purports to represent, and as an expression of the social and cultural forces which produced the literary work.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach means that the two subjects in interaction, in this case literature and history, inevitably constrain as well as enhance each other. Thus, in the present work, factual information from the wider historical situation has been used

to illuminate the text but care has been taken to secure the status of the novel as a work of imaginative literature so that any inaccuracies of dating in *Coonardoo*, where they occur, are not represented as detrimental to its value as a work of literature. At the same time the text acts as an inhibitor on the reconstruction of the historical situation; documentary evidence has to be omitted if it has no direct bearing on the text.

The value of the present work is that it illuminates a number of areas in the text of *Coonardoo*, an important work of Australian literature. It also demonstrates that the novel, within its limitation as a 'literary' work, is an adequate vehicle for conveying the historical situation in the North-West region during the first 60 years of European settlement. This is a part of Western Australia's pioneering past which has received limited coverage: for the most part, in the form of chronologies of specific towns, personal memoirs, or family histories. The present work attempts to portray a broad view of the early settlement of the North-West region based on the novel.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **CONSTRUCTION OF 'PLACE':**

#### **THE NORTH-WEST REGION**

This chapter explores the circumstances surrounding the writing of *Coonardoo*, and in particular Katharine Susannah Prichard's construction of the setting in her novel. It discusses the author's portrayal of the natural features of the landscape and the working environment of the cattle station located in the North-West region of Western Australia.

The chapter will show that in 1928 when Prichard commenced work on the text of *Coonardoo*, she had a variety of very pressing reasons for embarking on a work of fiction at that particular stage of her life and for electing to make the North-West the background to her text. Significant amongst these reasons was her economic situation. Economic necessity as a motive for producing a literary text in no way detracts from Prichard's artistic purpose. Stephen Greenblatt in his essay, 'Towards a Poetics of Culture' (1989), noted that in the production of a work of art 'society's dominant currencies, money and prestige, are invariably involved'. Greenblatt, 1989, p. 12). In this chapter it will be demonstrated that both of these factors obtained in the author's life at the time of the novel's production.

The chapter will also attempt an assessment of some of the theories which have been advanced in relation to Prichard's presentation of rural scenery and pioneering, or near pioneering communities. In particular, an exploration is made of the theory propounded by Jack Lindsay that a Marxist dialectical triad obtains in *Coonardoo* as well as in Prichard's other works of fiction. The chapter will also investigate the claims of other theorists that a Lawrentian influence is present in Prichard's depictions of countryside. Also, that Prichard adopts the romantic mode in order to make her landscapes both visible and literary.

A further point of discussion in the present chapter is that the setting of *Coonardoo* is both limited and repetitious in its construction; and that Prichard returned to her previous fiction to obtain much of the material which is included in scenic descriptions. It will also be shown that Prichard ameliorated the environmental conditions of the North-West and that this resulted in the depiction of a locale which is artistically satisfying but which does not capture the essentially daunting ambience of the region. Historical data reveal that very harsh and dangerous physical conditions were prevalent throughout the North-West during the 60 years that are covered in the text of the novel.

In his biography of Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Wild weeds and wind flowers: the life and letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard* (1975), Ric Throssell includes a letter written by Prichard in July 1928, soon after entering *Coonardoo* in the Bulletin's 'Great £500 Prize Novel competition'. In this letter Prichard speaks of the novel, *Coonardoo*, as: 'The story of the Nor' West I've been trying not to write'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 53). This was, seemingly, an anomalous statement for Prichard to have made in view of her recently published works, three of which had North-West settings and which together covered almost all the action of the novel. Only a few months earlier she had received the Triad's prize for her three-act play, *Brumby Innes* (1940); the previous year had seen the publication of her two short stories, the prize-winning, 'The cooboo' (1927) and 'Happiness' (1927). Additionally, all three works were concerned with Aborigines and the living and working conditions which existed on pastoral stations.

A significant difference between *Coonardoo* and the earlier works, possibly giving substance to Prichard's statement that *Coonardoo* is 'the story I was trying not to write', is that in *Coonardoo* Prichard presents the world of the North-West as it is experienced by an Aboriginal woman and a white man. The short story, 'Happiness', although narrated by an elderly Aboriginal woman, is restricted to an Aboriginal perception of the world of the white settlers. Similarly, 'The cooboo' is told entirely from the viewpoint

of a young Aboriginal woman station worker. The three-act play, *Brumby Innes*, focuses on a specific situation, a white pastoralist's sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women. The theme of the play is one of the central structures of *Coonardoo*, but in the novel Prichard attempts to explore the situation as it is experienced by the Aboriginal woman as well as by the white man.

Cohabitation between white men and Aboriginal women on pastoral stations, whilst prevalent, went unacknowledged by polite society. To the social sensibilities of the day it was unthinkable that a mutual attraction could exist between a white man and an Aboriginal woman. Fear of social disapproval might, partly, explain Prichard's reluctance to make use of such a situation as the basis of her novel. In the event, her diffidence was not misplaced. The *Bulletin's* readership expressed a great deal of disgust at the subject matter of the novel when it was serialised in late 1928. Nettie Palmer, in a journal entry dated 24 July 1933, recalled:

there was the hullabaloo raised when Katharine's *Coonardoo* began to be published serially, so many letters of protest arriving that the editor was thrown into a panic. (Palmer, 1988, p. 121).

From among her acquaintances, Prichard was censured by Mary Gilmore who wrote of *Coonardoo*: 'It is not merely a journalistic description of station life, it is vulgar and dirty'. (Quoted in Throssell, 1975, p. 54).

The story of this particular aspect of the North-West social situation had been gestating in the imagination of the author since her trip to the region in 1926. Ric Throssell stated that the story had entered into Prichard's mind, 'as the aborigines believe the spirit of a child enters his mother'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 52). But, possibly, the situation relied less on imagination than Throssell believed. A letter addressed to Hilda Esson, dated 1 November 1926, written by Prichard whilst she was still a guest at Turee Station, stated:

The story of the place and its people - as it is - simply writes itself. I'd

give anything to set it down as I see it - but the laws of hospitality ... My host - even his name is just right for him. And how can I get away from it? The most likeable type of Irishman - I like him immensely... I have a large sympathy for him, though of course he has the limitations of his type. (Throssell, 1975, p. 50).

Prichard's North-West visit had been at the invitation of the wife of the owner of Turee Station. Prichard explained in her autobiography:

A friend whose husband owned a cattle station in the North-west told me the incident which is the core of 'The Cooboo'. She invited me to visit her. Jim was eager for me to accept the invitation, so I travelled four hundred miles beyond the end of the railway to get the correct setting for that short-story. There I found, too, the background for *Coonardoo* and *Brumby Innes*. (Prichard, 1963, pp. 254-255).

The owner-manager in residence at Turee Station at the time of Prichard's visit was Joseph James Maguire whose wife was Doris R. Maguire. (see Appendix 1).

The sequence of ideas as they appear in the letter of 1 November 1926, referred to above, that there is a story that could be told *but* for the laws of hospitality which is followed by a description of Prichard's Irish host, suggests a possible connection between the story and the host. Although it should be noted that the two references are separated by ellipsis in Throssell's text which might imply the removal of certain material. (The original letter has not been discovered in either the Esson papers or Prichard's papers held at the Australian National Library). It is interesting to speculate whether there is a link between the situation which should not be mentioned - referred to in this letter - and Prichard's admission that *Coonardoo* contains information she had been reluctant to divulge. It is perhaps significant that Prichard points on both occasions to prohibitions attaching to stories of North-Western provenance.

In view of Prichard's disquiet with regard to her subject matter, it might appear surprising that she elected to write this particular story but, in fact, a multiplicity of circumstances may have influenced her to do so.



Immediately prior to commencing work on the text of *Coonardoo*, Prichard had completed almost three-quarters of the manuscript of a circus novel. This was to have been her entry in the *Bulletin's* £500 novel competition but, just three months before the closing date for entries to the competition, in February 1928, she abandoned it in disgust. In a letter to Nettie Palmer Prichard stated:

Have turned a bored and haughty stare at my stray leaves and notes for the new book. Can't be reconciled to 'em, interested in 'em. Damn 'em'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 52).

Prichard's dissatisfaction with the circus novel can be explained on both socio-political and literary grounds.

As a 'founding party member' (Wells, 1985, p.71; Hewett, 1969-70, p, 27) of the newly formed Communist Party of Australia, which came into being on 30 October 1920, Prichard could, undoubtedly, see that her circus novel lacked any really penetrating social or political insight; for all it purported to draw a parallel between the circus world and the circus of life. This was a serious omission as political comment had been a key element in her newly published novel, *Working Bullocks*, (1926), with its call to workers to withstand exploitation by their employers.

*Working Bullocks* had also established Prichard's professional standing in the world of Australian literature and the circus novel lacked something of the aesthetic quality attained by Prichard in the earlier work. Possibly, this became apparent to the author when she returned to her manuscript following a brief visit to the eastern states. Prichard's dissatisfaction with her unfinished circus novel, then, could be attributed to deficiencies in both its socio-political and literary qualities. But an even more compelling incentive to abandon the manuscript resided in the fact that she could not afford to continue with a literary project that offered so little chance of winning the £500

prize being offered by the *Bulletin*.

Economic pressures were building up in Prichard's domestic life. By early 1928, the Throssells were in deep financial trouble. Ric Throssell records that Hugo (Jim) Throssell, Prichard's husband, had been placed in charge of the family's budget by Katharine even though she was aware of his 'careless extravagance: but believed it was necessary to show she had confidence in him'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 62). Hugo had speculated persistently and unwisely, particularly in wheat futures and in blocks of residential land. (Throssell, 1975, p. 64). Prichard, herself, referred to the 'financial crises' of early 1928. (Throssell, 1975, p. 53). The *Bulletin* £500 prize would meet the family's immediate needs and Prichard urgently needed to submit a text with some possibility of winning.

The Throssell family debt would continue to rise until by the early thirties it was estimated to be 'something like £4000'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 65). Ric Throssell noted that following Hugo Throssell's suicide in 1934 his debts were assessed for probate at £9659. 15s. 11d. (Throssell, 1975, p. 74). (Information supplied by the Department of Economics, University of Western Australia and contained in a note appended to 'Acknowledgements and Abbreviations', in G. Bolton, *A fine country to starve in* (1972), gives an estimated value of £1 in 1931 as being equivalent to \$33.50 in mid-1994. Thus, the Throssell debt of £9659. 15s. 11d. would have a present day value of approximately \$323 610).

Prichard had already produced successful literary works based on rural life; not only those which emanated from her recent field trip to the North-West but also from her days when she was employed as governess by station families in the eastern states. Her earliest literary achievement had been a series of articles based on station life in the back country of New South Wales, some 300 miles beyond Broken Hill, which had been bought by *New Idea* and serialised under the title: 'A city girl in Central Australia: her

adventures and experiences at "Back o' Beyond". The author's name is given, variously, as 'Miss K. Pritchard' and 'Kathleen Prichard'. (*New Idea*, May-October, 1906).

*Coonardoo* fulfilled a number of necessary conditions. Firstly, the subject matter addressed an urgent social problem, stated by Prichard in 1956 as 'to draw attention to the abuse of Aboriginal women by white men - a subject that demanded immediate attention'. (Irwin, 1956, p. 31). Secondly, it had a spectacular rural landscape which gave the novel a powerful aesthetic dimension. Finally, it was in the tradition of her already successful works in that it was based on the North-West and on station life.

So, some 18 months after her return from the North-West pastoral district, and seated at the corner of the verandah of her Greenmount home on the Darling escarpment overlooking the city of Perth, Prichard commenced work on the manuscript of *Coonardoo*, which was to become joint winner with Marjorie Barnard Eldershaw's *A house is built* (1929) in the *Bulletin's* £500 prize novel competition of 1928.

The boundaries of the 'North-West' referred to in Prichard's *Coonardoo*, are identified in this thesis as those of the North-West Statistical District shown in the *Statistical Register of Western Australia, 1923-24*. This Statistical District covers an area of more than 300 000 sq km. Thus, in this thesis, the southern boundary of Prichard's North-West region is just below the Tropic of Capricorn stretching from Minilya to Lake Disappointment and then northwards via the Mackay and the Paterson Ranges. The northern boundary is in the region of Port Hedland. The region includes Roebourne, Onslow, the Pilbara, the North-West Cape and Exmouth. These boundaries are shown on the following map:



A geographical description of the North-West shows a region that is fringed by a coastal plain varying in breadth from 75 km to 150 kms. Along the margin of this plain mangrove swamps form an impenetrable barrier for much of the coastline. The land surface rises inland in a series of level terraces from 40 km to 150 km wide rising from 150 m to 900 m above sea level. The centre of the region is traversed by ranges of hills of which the Hamersley plateau is the most significant, averaging approximately 100 km in width and rising to more than 1200 m above sea level in the area of Mount Bruce and Mount Meharry.

Many rivers have their sources in the Hamersley plateau and run to the sea, in all cases their flow is seasonal consisting for much of the year of isolated pools but becoming raging torrents when cyclones and torrential rain strike the region. Along the banks of the rivers eucalypts mark the channel of flow and large tracts of grassy land are found in the areas of their flood plains. (This information is taken from a number of sources including maps and descriptions in *Western Australia: an atlas of human endeavour 1929-1979*. (Jarvis, 1979, pp. 20-23) and *Journals of Australian exploration, 1846-1858*, (Gregory and Gregory, 1884, pp. 94-95)).

The rainfall of the area is very uncertain totalling 392 mm in the year and falling over 41 days during January and February and to a lesser extent in December and March but with an annual variation of more than 40 per cent. The area is subject to lengthy periods of severe drought.

The textual Wytaliba cattle station is described as 'a million acres between the Nungarra hills on the west, To-morrow ranges on the east and tributaries of the coastal rivers north and south'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). The names are fictional but the landforms are identifiable as those which mark the boundaries of Turee Station. Of which the Angelo River forms the western boundary and Tunnel Creek forms the eastern, both are tributaries of the coastal river, the Ashburton; ranges of hills are found to the north and south of the property.

Ric Throssell, Prichard's son, who, as a four-year-old, accompanied his mother to the North-West, is astounded that his mother could discover beauty in the North-West landscape. In 'Delos of a sun god's race or Mammon's demesne: Katharine Susannah Prichard's Australia' (1984), Throssell recalls his own experiences of the region both on his childhood visit in 1926 and on subsequent occasions. He wrote:

Even now, returning to Coonardoo country from the safe altitude of 20 000 feet, I look down upon the red soil, the low blue hills, the dry creek beds and washaways and find awe rather than beauty in the land below me. To step out from the safe air conditioned comfort of the plane into the parching heat of the North West that strikes like a physical force is to marvel that Katharine could see beyond the physical discomforts and find beauty in the wilderness. (Throssell, 1984a, p.101).

In the following discussion, issues concerning setting raised in Coonardoo are developed within the context of Prichard's experience with *Working Bullocks* - both its production and reception.

Prichard had dealt at length with the natural environment in her novel *Working Bullocks*, published by Jonathon Cape late in 1926. When it appeared, the novel was acclaimed by both friends and reviewers alike as an outstanding literary achievement for the author, but it was censured for its over-emphasis on landscape; Prichard had allowed setting, the South-West timberlands of Western Australia, to completely saturate the text.

Discussing the place of landscape in Prichard's works, her long-time friend, Vance Palmer, stated: 'Sometimes there was too great an emphasis on the natural world'. He recalled that, after reading *Working Bullocks*, Henry Handel Richardson had complained: 'I can't see the people for the trees'. (Palmer, 1959, p. 18).

Ric Throssell recalled Prichard's conscious decision to downplay environment in her

later novels. He stated that after *Working Bullocks*:

Katharine did not repeat the experiment of using the natural background to a novel as the major element in its construction. In each of her later novels the sense of place remains, together with man and work as equal parts of the triad. (Throssell, 1984a, p. 101).

Throssell referred to statements made by Jack Lindsay in his essay, 'The novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard' (1961), that the defining feature of Prichard's work is a 'dialectical triad of people-work-nature'. (Lindsay, 1961, p. 373). Lindsay noted that Prichard's novels are concerned with the Australian scene and the struggle of the common-folk to be at home in it. Lindsay stated that Prichard's foremost interest is with working environments and with the group. 'And for her the group is always the productive group: men and women united concretely in labour-process'. (Lindsay, 1961, p. 367). Lindsay noted that Prichard selected her settings from communities and industries which were at, or near, the pioneering phase - opal mine, timber mill, cattle station - in order to demonstrate the labour-process in operation and that Prichard uses these primitive settings to show the changes occurring in the community in response to changes in the prevailing economic system. At the concrete labour stage, men and women unite to achieve communally understood goals; essentially they are exhibiting the relationships contained in the philosophy of 'mateship', which Lindsay also referred to as brotherly work. Prichard then shows the community as it suffers the trauma of entering the abstract labour-process when the cash-nexus enters the scene and labour becomes a product to be bought and sold in the wage market. But, Lindsay stated, Prichard is then able to demonstrate that those fundamental qualities of comradeship which were the source of human well-being in the concrete labour-process are not lost but re-emerge in altered form to 'threaten' the world of the cash-nexus. Lindsay stated that it is Prichard's grasp of the social essence of work which lifts her representations above the documentary and creates their poetic value. Lindsay goes on to say that Prichard recognised that social essence includes more than 'mateship', it involves the

'ultimate unity of labour-process and natural process'. (Lindsay, 1961, p. 373). *Working Bullocks*, he noted, is paradigmatic of this dialectical triad at work in Prichard's fiction.

In *Working Bullocks*, Lindsay argued, the timber workers are merged with the world of work and nature but, because they are exploited by the economic system, their humanity has been submerged and they are mere 'working bullocks'. But they are not so vitally submerged that they have lost the potentiality to perceive a future in which they are no longer alienated from their own essences, their fellow workers and nature. The workers are also in conflict with the natural world, they must 'fight to hold their own in the dangerous world of nature as well as to keep alive in the crushing world of the cash-nexus'. (Lindsay, 1961, p. 374).

Ellen Malos in her article, 'Jack Lindsay's essay on the novels of Katharine Susannah Prichard' (1963), responded to Lindsay and suggested, at the outset, that Lindsay's 'article is more a meditation upon themes and ideas suggested by the novels than a study of the novels themselves'. (Malos, 1963, p. 413). Malos stated that Prichard fails to present a unified vision of life and that Lindsay overlooks the unresolved conflicts in her characters' personal lives between their loyalty to community and its norms and their own well-being. Sophie, Elodie and Violet must relinquish the full development of their musical ability in order to remain true to outback values, and Prichard's pairs of lovers must sacrifice their natural inclination towards a mate in order not to breach the values of society. In particular, Malos stated, Prichard never resolved the conflict between her love of nature and man in harmony with nature and her view of labour-process as necessary to social development. *Au fond*, Malos believed, 'Miss Prichard hated the changes which were taking place, destroying what she felt to be a harmonious relationship between man and nature'. (Malos, 1963, p. 416).

In fact, Lindsay's argument for a 'dialectical' process operating in Prichard's novels is not easily sustained. Nowhere in Prichard's works can it be demonstrated that the



components of his triad people-work-nature interact to produce change. The Marxist notion of a 'dialectic' holds that the inherent contradictions contained within a situation are the driving force of change; and this process is not fully worked out in any of Prichard's works, not even in the text of *Working Bullocks* which Lindsay used as the exemplar of his theorem.

Even though Prichard, herself, desired change in the timber industry, and in *Working Bullocks* lists the 'real' life grievances of the exploited workers in the timber industry, she cannot show the impetus for change emerging from within the material conditions of the workers. The driving force comes from outside the community in the person of Mark Smith, an itinerant agitator (a Zolaesque figure) who goads the workers into strike action. In the circumstances, the strikers easily succumb to their oppressive employers accepting little more than vague promises for the future; thankful to regain their jobs. Nothing changes and at the end of the novel, both Red and Deb accept their 'bullock' status, content to differ in only one respect, as Red says, 'But we'll breed.' (Prichard, 1926, p. 251).

Discussion now returns to the main subject of the thesis, the text of *Coonardoo*, and to a deliberation on how Lindsay perceived his dialectical triad, man-work-nature, operating in this particular novel.

When Lindsay applied his triadic configuration to *Coonardoo*, he dispensed with the notion of a dialectical interaction. The triadic configuration here is described as 'a threefold focus of personal character, work, and relation to nature'. (Lindsay, 1961, p. 378). It is in this 'unifying' role that the triad is generally accepted. Henrietta Drake-Brockman, for example, stated that: '*Coonardoo* is the most contained of all the novels ... and what Jack Lindsay calls the author's "dialectical triad of people-work-nature" more artistically harmonious'. (Drake-Brockman, 1967, p. 28).

Lindsay's analysis of *Coonardoo* demonstrates that his triadic configuration operates negatively in the text - failed personal relationships destroy the land. Lindsay notes a further reversal occurs because the dehumanising economic forces which exploit and dehumanise the workers, the Aborigines, also degrade and deform the power-wielding white employers. In fact, Lindsay posits, the Aborigines are able to preserve an element of their humanity because they retain their tribal unity and 'harmonious union with nature', whilst the whites have lost 'all natural harmony'. Because the whites hold false notions of the necessary relationships between themselves and the Aborigines, the whites have rejected all possibility of 'the brotherly communion of work and its unity with natural process'. (Lindsay, 1961, p. 377).

Lindsay averred that the failed relationship between whites and Aborigines and its consequences for the land are expressed in the relationship between Hugh and Coonardoo. Hugh's false 'pride' frustrates his relationship with Coonardoo and leads to his final brutal rejection of her. The land fails when Hugh drives her away. Chitali makes explicit the connection between Coonardoo and the land when he says that 'Coonardoo's spirit had withered and died when she went away from Wytaliba... And that withering and dying of Coonardoo's spirit had caused a blight on the place.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 199).

Lindsay stated his agreement with his view:

But the natives are right: and in Chitali's symbolism the full meaning of the tale unfolds itself. Coonardoo has become the very spirit of the Australian earth, which the whites of the cash-nexus are murdering. (Lindsay, 1961, p. 378).

Ric Throssell recorded that Prichard regarded Lindsay's article as 'a wonderfully thoughtful and clear-sighted thing' but rather too analytical. She stated: 'I feel I'm an instinctive story writer'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 173).

Prichard, in fact, did not ascribe a symbolic value to the role of Coonardoo in the novel. Throssell stated in 'Katharine Susannah Prichard: a standard of value' (1984) that: 'She explicitly disavowed the suggestion that Coonardoo was a symbolic figure - a spirit of the land'. (Throssell, 1984b, p. 10).

The contradiction between the text and the reported statement by Prichard, opens up several lines of speculation. The possibility exists that Prichard did not fully understand her own text, so that it was left to later generations of readers and critics to recognize 'Coonardoo's symbolic significance as the land itself'. (Modjeska, 1990, p. ix). A further possibility, and one that is offered by Adrian Mitchell in his essay 'Fictions' (1981), is that Prichard was inadequate to the literary task she had set herself. Mitchell stated: 'Prichard is unable to define Coonardoo's personal relationship to [the land] because she has been unable to create a clear sense of Coonardoo herself'. (Mitchell, 1981, p. 119).

It is possible that Prichard faced a socio-political dilemma vis-a-vis her text and her reading public. She may have been reluctant to assign a symbolic value to Coonardoo either as the essence of the land, or as the exploited, ravished and dispossessed Aboriginal nation, because to do so would call into question the right of the white settlers to the land they occupied and/or censure their treatment of Aboriginal employees. Prichard specifically denied any such intention in her 'Introduction' to the first edition of the novel, when she stated that the Aborigines on isolated North-West cattle stations 'are treated with consideration and kindness'. (Prichard, 1929, p. v). Referring to this claim, Jack Beasley stated: 'The odd thing lies in believing... this on a detached intellectual plane, then writing such damning condemnations of the station owners in the stories'. (Beasley, 1993, p. 87).

Again, Prichard's denial of Coonardoo's spiritual affiliation with the land is perhaps a consequence of the author's political commitments which valorized social realism in writing. Even as she constructed the text, Prichard may have been aware that

*Coonardoo* was moving too strongly towards a modernist symbolism so that she deliberately portrayed the spiritual aspect ambiguously. She further obscured the issue by utilizing the narrative device of unreliable narration: Chitali's statement linking Coonardoo and the land is transmitted through the consciousness of the prevaricating Cock-eyed Bob and then only in so far as he is able to interpret the mystically minded Chitali's Aboriginal dialect. Even then Bob dismisses the notion:

'Aw, go to hell!' Bob exclaimed irritably. (Prichard, 1929, p. 200).

Prichard's choice of closed communities for her settings is adverted to by Dorothy Hewett in 'Excess of love: the irreconcilable in Katharine Susannah Prichard' (1969-1970). A predilection which she attributed to Prichard's training in journalism. Hewett stated that Prichard 'had always depended heavily of the journalist's habit of deliberately searching out dramatic background, exotic places, exotic jobs ... opal gougers, pearlers, goldminers, timbercutters, primitive Aboriginals' (sic) and that: 'Most of the power and insight had always tended to be with the environment not the individual. The characters dissolve into the landscape'. (Hewett, 1969-1970, p. 29).

A.D. Hope in his essay, 'The great Australian mirage: Katharine Susannah Prichard' (1974), discussed Prichard's preoccupation with community. He noted that Prichard 'painstakingly' visited the communities she portrayed in her novels and that these isolated groups were for her the 'real' Australia and that outside these groups life is 'adulterated, corrupted or slightly bogus'. (Hope, 1974, p. 241).

The near-pioneering community which constitutes Wyaliba cattle station in *Coonardoo*, engages in just such a polar opposition. Fundamentally, Wyaliba is the site of order, and chaos obtains beyond its borders. Whilst she remains within the boundaries of Wyaliba, Coonardoo is safe. Hugh knows this and when she wishes to accompany him to the coast when he is ill, 'Hugh said no to that. He knew the life of the coastal towns

too well to wish her to go near them'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 68). Wyaliba preserves its Aborigines' human status but this is lost to Aborigines beyond its boundaries: 'Hugh believed Wyaliba people were different from the blacks on so many other stations. Poor degraded wretches, treated like dogs, worse than dogs'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 100). Order reigns in Bessie Watt's kingdom of Wyaliba in relation to Aboriginal concubinage and it survives her death: 'Mrs Bessie, Mollie understood, would not have Sheba sleep in the house ... and Mollie decided that was one rule of Mrs Bessie's she would always enforce'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 99). In the adjoining property, Geary's station, Nuniewarra, chaos holds sway: 'Geary had been known as "a gin shepherd" for some time and a family of half-castes swarmed about his verandas'. (Prichard, 1929 p. 30).

A.D. Hope noted that the dramatic tension of Prichard's works arises from the disturbance of the social mores in the community: the severing of the binding force encapsulated in the philosophy of 'mateship' that characterises its social essence. (Hope, 1974, p. 241). Hugh breaks the bonds of mutual dependence when he expels Coonardoo from Wyaliba. Thereafter, the forces of chaos invade the community: Coonardoo becomes degraded and destroyed in the coastal towns (Prichard, 1929, p. 197); Hugh acquires huge debts and degenerates until he is as 'dirty as the boys' (Prichard, 1929, p. 195); and Wyaliba becomes the property of Sam Geary. (Prichard, 1929, p. 200).

Prichard emphasised her intimate knowledge of the locations she chose for her settings. In her autobiography, *Child of the hurricane* (1963), she recalled that she made visits with her husband to the timberlands of the South-West, the gold-rush at Larkinsville, and that he had arranged for her to travel with Wirth's Circus to gain authentic material for her circus novel. But, even so, her landscapes only partially reflect the locations that she appropriated for her settings.

Richard Sadleir noted that Prichard's descriptions of setting are 'extremely subjective' not really related to the textures of life and experience. He noted that when Prichard

depicted nature it is 'never unmanageable, never so awesome or so overwhelming that the human being becomes meaningless'. (Sadleir, 1961, p. 34).

Prichard's presentation of the North-West region is largely in terms of its discomforts of heat, drought and dust:

Away from the homestead for two or three weeks at a time, he [Hugh] moved cattle from dry water-holes on to windmills, driving night and day wherever there was feed and water. Eyes narrowed to slits against the fierce white light, sweltering through thick red dust, he kept the bullocks going across sun-blasted stretches of hills and plain. Drovers and beasts plodded, drooping and drowsing; the boys swayed half asleep as they rode. (Prichard, 1929, p. 116).

This is as bad as it gets: the natural world is oppressive but not overpowering.

Although the novel is directly concerned with a forty year period from about the year 1885 until the mid-1920s, the text does look back to the early days of white settlement. The following analysis sets events in the fictional text against factual accounts of the area and era in order to demonstrate that Prichard ameliorates rather than accurately represents the natural conditions which were the 'real' life experiences of those who encountered the region during this period.

It must be emphasised, that the comparisons are made with the full realisation that Prichard did not intend to present an historical novel, *per se*, but a literary text which evokes the period and setting. The analysis demonstrates an impulse to romanticism in Prichard's writing rather than to social realism, which would have been more consistent with her affinity to Marxism.

The first steps towards settlement of the North-West occurred in 1861 when the region became the object of economic interests. The Western Australian colony was little more than 30 years' old, but the settlers were already experiencing a shortage of grazing land.

Additional pasturage was essential for the continued prosperity of the colony. Britain was also interested in exploring the North-West with a view to obtaining land suitable for the cultivation of cotton to replace American exports which had declined during the civil war in that country. The expedition to the North-West, under the leadership of Francis Thomas Gregory, was financed by both British and colonial interests.

Gregory and his party left Fremantle on 23 April 1861 aboard the barque, *Dolphin*, and came ashore at Nichol Bay, not far from the site of the future town of Roebourne, on 14 May 1861. (Gregory and Gregory, 1884, p. 55). They spent five months in the area of the Maitland, the Fortescue, the Oakover, the De Grey and the Ashburton rivers.

Prichard chose precisely this location for the wanderings of Ted and Bessie Watt in the early days before they purchased the Wyaliba cattle station. A brief summary of their early history, states: 'They knocked about the Nor'-West a long time together, droving and carting from the coast to stations and scattered mining settlements along the Ashburton, the Fortescue and the De Grey'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8).

Unfortunately for historical accuracy, Prichard also stated that this occurred *after* Bessie had been a 'schoolteacher in Roebourne' (Prichard, 1929, p.8), and this would not have been possible as the first school in Roebourne was not built until 1873. (De La Rue, 1979, p.43). Textual evidence places the Watt family on Wyaliba cattle station by 1877. A mere three or four years could not in any terms be construed as a 'long time' as is stated for their carting and droving activities in the region.

Gregory's report detailed the expedition's progress through the North-West as it trekked along river beds and followed coastal rivers inland. The expedition surveyed and made inventories of the region's resources as they travelled. Their progress was necessarily slow due to the rough terrain over which they journeyed. Additionally, they were burdened by the heavy and cumbersome equipment they took with them that was

essential for their survival and comfort. The expedition carried tents, cooking equipment, water and food for several months, surveying instruments, guns, hobbles and bridles, all of which had to be conveyed by horses, many of which had been lent to the expedition and were unused to pack saddles.

Only a brief mention is made of Ted and Bessie's journey through the region. It is recounted, retrospectively, by Geary:

'Ted'd drive the ration cart and she'd [Bessie] drive the bullocks with a couple of boys - black imps - about ten and twelve ... But it was rough on the roads those days.... Damper and salt meat was all we had to eat, with a bit of 'roo steak or wild turkey now and then.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 37).

A limited menu constitutes all the hardships endured by the Watts during their droving and carting days. Omitted from the text are any details of the gruelling work that must have been entailed in moving a bullock team over vast stretches of rugged terrain. Instead, the text takes up the reversal of sex roles in the distribution of labour that occurred between Bessie and her husband: 'Here,' she'd say to Ted, 'You get the breakfast, and I'll get the bullocks.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 37). The text hints that their unusual division of labour has sexual implications, Bessie remarks:

'When Ted's with the ration cart I know where he is, and when I'm with the bullocks he knows where I am.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 37).

'Drought-stricken' stretches of country were frequently encountered by Gregory and his surveying party. Men and horses suffered extremes of thirst as they traversed the waterless plains and sandy deserts of the region. Gregory's journal entry for 7 September 1861 recorded an incident when the horses failed and he had to set out alone to look for water:

Two hours' heavy toil through the sand, under a broiling sun, brought me to the ranges, where I continued to hunt up one ravine after another until 5.0 pm without success. Twelve hours' almost incessant walking, on a



scanty breakfast, and without water, with the thermometer over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, began to tell on me rather severely. (Gregory & Gregory, 1884, p. 81).

Gregory's experience of near-death from dehydration can be set against a similar event in *Coonardoo* when Sam Geary and Cock-eyed Bob call at Wyaliba after prospecting for gold in the hills. They have almost died from thirst, but it does not seem to have been a very great ordeal:

'Any luck?' Hugh asked.

'Not too bad - ' Bob began.

Geary's reluctant growl rumbled. 'But we near done a perish for water, You.'

'The gold's there all right,' Bob said ... 'But Sam got the wind up about there being no water and the camels clearin' out. So I reckoned best thing we could do was to come in for stores.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 33).

Despite the hardships that he endured, in the North-West, Gregory's final report to the Governor of Western Australia was entirely enthusiastic. He had discovered more than 2 or 3 million acres of land suitable for pasture and at least 200 000 acres of this land was additionally suitable for agriculture particularly adaptable to the cultivation of cotton. In addition, because the land was elevated well above sea level, Gregory considered it made wool-growing a viable prospect. (Gregory & Gregory, 1884, p. 96).

Of the natural products of economic value, Gregory's report included an abundance of pearl oysters; highly scented sandalwood, but too sparsely scattered to be of export value; a variety of fruits including sweet and water melons; a wild fig; a sweet plum and a species of breadfruit similar to that found in South Africa. (Gregory & Gregory, 1884, p. 96). He further noted that the freshwater rivers, the Ashburton, the Fortescue, the De Grey, and the Oakover, carried fish far inland; but that the only mineral he had found was iron. He considered Nichol Bay to be an excellent all weather harbour second only to King George Sound, and that the climate was less oppressive than in the settled areas

of the colony. (Gregory & Gregory, 1884, p. 95).

Gregory was constantly excited by the wealth of nature he found during his expedition: abundant and beautiful fish in rocky pools, colourful birds, and strange and exotic plants, one of which he described in detail and as 'without exception, the handsomest shrub I have ever seen in Australia'. (Gregory & Gregory, 1884, p. 56).

Strangely, Prichard's text remains silent on so many of these natural features. She directly experienced many parts of the region not only during her stay on Turee Station but also on the two lengthy journeys she made through the area. In her letter to the Palmers of 17 October 1926 she wrote:

It has been a splendid jaunt from my own very comfortable [sic] box of a house on the hillside down south, and took a week to get here, with campings out by the way side, and will take a fortnight or more going home down by the Ashburton river and staying at stations on the way down. Then from Onslow by the coastal steamer to Freemantle [sic]. (NLA MS 1174/1/2856-7).

Prichard referred to her journey and a ten day muster in her letter to Hilda Esson of 1 November 1926: 'And we go down before the worst of the summer - by the coastal boat from Onslow on Nov. 23 ... And next week I'm going on a ten days muster with men of the place, no other female, except perhaps a gin'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 50).

The text remains silent on the hazards of the littoral district of the region, in respect of both the dangerous topography of its shoreline and its treacherous climatic conditions. In the early days of settlement all communication between the North-West and the south was by ship. The western coast which had been a graveyard of shipping from the early days of discovery by the Dutch now became the cause of loss of life for the Europeans who settled the region.

In 1867, seven ships were lost between Nichol Bay and Fremantle, among these was the *Emma* which disappeared with 47 passengers and crew on board, including the Resident Magistrate's son, Trevarton Sholl. The fate of the *Emma* was never discovered. In *Pioneers of the Nor'-West Australia* (1913), Lockier Clere Burges, who had been a passenger on a previous trip, reported that on that occasion, possibly due to an error with the compass, the *Emma* had gone aground on the Abrolhos Islands and was stranded there for several days, during which time the ship suffered a certain amount of damage. (Burges, 1913, pp. 29-30).

Jack Loney in *Australia's shipwreck coast and other stories* (1986) recorded that on the Cyclone Coast, from Cossack northwards, cyclones struck in almost every year. In 1870 two luggers were wrecked off Roebourne and 2 men were drowned; in 1875, four vessels were sunk and 58 lives were lost. A late cyclone in 1887 struck the Ninety Mile Beach and 40 vessels were sunk or badly damaged and more than 140 men drowned. The list goes on and even in the 1920s men were drowned and severe damage to shipping in the area is recorded. (Loney, 1986, pp. 88-91).

The loss of so much shipping adversely affected the entire community which was frequently short of supplies and on several occasions came close to starvation. The settlers also suffered economically when goods they sent to markets in the south were lost and consignments of stock they had ordered failed to arrive.

Almost every family suffered the loss of at least one of its members in ships that sank or disappeared without trace. Their anguish was made more severe by uncertainty: it was not unknown for shipwreck victims to be found on offshore islands or isolated beaches, weeks later.

Just such survivors had been 19-year-old, Ivan Juric, and 16-year-old, Miho Baccich, midshipman, of the Croatian barque, *Stefano*, which was wrecked off the North-West

coast on 27 October 1875. Of the seventeen men aboard, ten men managed to reach the shore on an isolated part of the coast. Eight of these died of exposure and only Juric and Baccich were alive on 18 April 1876 when by chance Charlie Tuckey of Mandurah, the skipper of the pearling cutter, *Jessie*, landed on the beach to be greeted by the two young men. Tuckey, a pearler, had seen the Aborigines' fires and had come ashore with goodwill gifts of flour and sugar. He knew that it was wise to maintain friendly relations with the local Aboriginal groups from which he recruited divers each year: previously, an Aboriginal diver had murdered a crewman on board one of Tuckey's pearling vessels.

Neven Smoje reported the incident in his article, 'Shipwrecked on the North-West Coast: the ordeal of the survivors of the *Stefano*' (1978). Smoje stated that in about the year 1875 Tuckey had learned from an Aboriginal diver:

that a large vessel had been wrecked on the coast a long time ago, and that its survivors had been captured and eaten by local tribesmen, including himself. It may well have been true; several ships had disappeared in local waters in earlier years. (Smoje, 1978, p. 41).

Despite the notorious reputation of offshore conditions, Prichard's Watt family never have any apprehension about taking sea trips between the North-West and Fremantle or Geraldton. Bessie sends her eight-year-old son, Hugh, to school by ship in 1885 with apparent unconcern for his safety at sea. Her most pressing fear is that Geary might 'go on a bender' and fail to deliver Hugh to the ship. She tells Bob:

'Paddy'll keep an eye on Hughie and hand him over to Captain Frenssen, who is an old friend of mine. The school people will meet the boat.'  
(Prichard, 1929, p. 7).

Later, Hugh in his early twenties becomes ill and is taken aboard ship to Geraldton and the voyage is a cure in itself. The text reads:

those days on the freshening blue sea to Geraldton were like lying in a cradle and being rocked to sleep after the long journey from Wyaliba...

Hugh ate oranges ... lying gazing over the blue dancing expanse of southern ocean, sleeping, dreaming, not thinking. (Prichard, 1929, p. 71).

It is true that the voyage between Fremantle and the North-West was less dangerous after 1881 when a steamship service was introduced and a monthly call was made at north-western ports from April to December. During the rest of the year, De La Rue recorded: 'The dangers of the cyclone season made the powers-that-be stop the service'. (De La Rue, 1979, p. 117).

Again, the destructive power is missing from Prichard's presentation of inland cyclonic activity. Prichard's 'willy-willies' (referred to in the text by their Aboriginal name, 'winning-arras') are both picturesque and life-giving. The text reads: 'Red haze of dust storms hid the homestead, and winning-arras spun, dancing in long unsteady columns from over the plains ... Coonardoo had been caught in a winning-arra, and a cooboo dropped into her'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 74).

In the history of the region, cyclonic gales were frequent and are described by Nancy E. Withnell Taylor in *Yeera-Muk-A-Doo: A social history of the first settlement of North West Australia told through the Withnell and Hancock families 1861 to 1890* (1980). Taylor, granddaughter of both families, based her text on information contained in letters and journals of the Withnell and Hancock families both of which were prominent in the early days of white settlement in the North-West.

*Yeera-Muk-A-Doo* includes a reference to the 'killer' storm of April 1872, which destroyed the home of John and Emma Withnell, tearing it from its foundation. The

experiences of Emma Withnell are recounted by Taylor:

**It was a night of terror. Emma, now advanced in pregnancy, suffered a deep gash to her wrist and it bled severely. To her horror her baby, James Aubrey, who was only two years old, was blown from her arms out into the storm. (Taylor, 1980, p.160).**

Early the following morning the child was found wedged between two rocks 'completely naked, unharmed, and howling lustily'. Emma then set off to visit her sister, Fanny, who was alone in a wooden homestead, which, Emma discovered, had been completely demolished by the cyclone. Taylor described the situation that Emma encountered:

**In this saddest of countries, this was the saddest thing she had seen. Fanny lay completely unconscious in the rain soaked bed; her long fair hair, drenched, was draped over the pillow. Cradled in her arm lay her dead baby. They had been exposed to the wind and rain during that dreadful night and when the roof collapsed it was partly supported by the top of the iron bedstead. It was the bedstead which saved Fanny, but not her baby, from certain death. (Taylor, 1980, p. 160).**

The Bureau of Meteorology confirms that cyclones reach inland as far as Turee Creek and beyond. Although they will have weakened after crossing the coast, they still comprise winds in excess of 100 km per hour and can cause much damage from flying debris and flooding from torrential rain.

Prichard was aware of the Withnell family and their history and includes a reference to Emma in the text. Hugh compares his querulous wife, Mollie, unfavourably with Emma Withnell:

**And had not Mrs Withnell, the pioneer woman of the Nor-West, brought up a large family on a lonely station, without sight of another white woman for years at a time? (Prichard, 1929, p. 118).**

Nancy Withnell Taylor recorded that Emma 'said in later years it was the loneliness and isolation she felt most' when she was the 'only white woman in that vast country'. (Taylor, 1980, p. 44).

Emma's sister, Fanny, returned to the south. Taylor records that for Fanny 'the North proved a life of sorrow'. She had lost a daughter, and the baby born in the gale, and then in August 1872 her four-year-old son died of diphtheria. Just 23 years old and Fanny had lost three children to that hard country. (Taylor, 1980, pp. 166-167). But this was not the end of her sorrows: in January 1879, her husband, George, who had gone south to purchase stock, was drowned on the return journey when the schooner, *Rosette*, was wrecked in a raging gale just off the coast of Cossack. Fanny had endured too much, 'she packed and left the North-West by the first vessel that sailed from Cossack, returning to her mother and the old family home at Beverley'. (Taylor, 1980, p. 198).

The omission of so many of the region's more spectacular features means that Prichard fails to fully realise her North-West setting. And yet Prichard's presentation of the North-West scene is praised by those who claim to know the area well. Henrietta Drake-Brockman stated: 'The opening passages of that book are in my opinion as fine as anything yet written in Australian creative prose... The impact of the countryside strikes clear and sharp, almost as if you see and smell it'. She goes on to say: 'Because I know the North so well, perhaps I am unduly prejudiced in favour of *Coonardoo*, but I do not believe so'. (Drake-Brockman, 1953, pp. 217-218).

A careful reading of *Coonardoo* reveals that the landscape is composed of a fairly narrow range of elements. And a great many of these make their initial appearance in the first paragraphs of the novel. Thereafter, they recur repeatedly throughout the novel.

In the following extracts which have been taken from the opening paragraphs of *Coonardoo*, I have emphasised the elements which are repeated throughout the text and have included in brackets the, very approximate, number of times they appear. This analysis was not rigidly carried out but it is fair to say these numbers indicate the minimum recurrence of the particular item.

The novel opens with Coonardoo gazing out across the land towards the horizon. Coonardoo inventories the landscape as she sits clicking two small sticks and singing quietly 'under **dark bushes** (12) overhung with curdy white blossom', near the veranda of the 'long house of mud bricks and corrugated iron'. The Aborigines are asleep in 'the brushwood sheds beyond the kala miah'. Coonardoo watches 'the **plains** (52) , the wide shallow pan of **red earth** (15) under **ironstone pebbles**(12) which spread before her to the furry edge of the **mulga** (22), grey-green, **under pale-blue sky**'. (9) The next paragraph refers to the windmill and the station buildings, and the heat and the '**clear white light**' (19), 'Trunks of **gum-trees** (20) were chalk white all along the dry bed of the **creek**, (40) and beyond the creek, bare and red, soared the ridge of **dog- toothed hills** (38). In addition more than 20 specific references are made to the 'Tomorrow ranges'.

Such a quantitative analysis might appear rather an empty exercise, to say the least. But in fact, the repetitions go beyond the text of *Coonardoo* and appear in Prichard's earliest fiction, 'A city girl in Central Australia': her adventures and experiences at "Back o' Beyond'" (1906), Here the station environment is described in the following terms:

As far as you can see, the country is Willara. To the east, long and bare the plains lie. To the west, stony stretches and a long, low line of hills above the edges of the creek trees. In the north, again, are stones, gravelled quartz, iron and sandstone, with ragged mulga straggling among them. A muddy stream moves slowly round the homestead, with slender gums, in grey-green leafage, hovering over it. (Prichard, *New Idea*, 6 June 1906, p. 1182).

The North-West descriptions that appear in the opening paragraphs of *Coonardoo* appear to have their source in a 'big black exercise book' into which the excited 23-year-old Prichard scribbled details of her surroundings as she travelled by horse-drawn coach to take up her position as governess in 'the back country of New South Wales' in 1906. In *Child of the Hurricane* (1963), Prichard quoted from this exercise book in



which she had described the 'jagged rocks on high rugged hills' and 'the grey-green of scanty mulga-trees'. She had also written: 'The creeks were all empty beds of smooth-worn pebbles' and 'the plains, spread with gravelled ironstone, lie black and glistening'. (Prichard, 1963, p. 80).

Prichard's short story 'Happiness' (1927), which is virtually the prototype of *Coonardoo*, also contains many of these elements. What is praiseworthy is Prichard's skill in finding so many ways of describing the same natural phenomena. In "Happiness" she speaks of 'those bushes with curds of blossom' (Prichard, 1927b, p. 103); 'the wedge of red and yellow purple-riven hills' (Prichard, 1927b, p. 105); and '[a]cross a stretch of ironstone pebbles the buildings of Nyedee homestead were clear in the high light of early morning'. (Prichard, 1927b, p. 103).

The inclusion of so many descriptive passages that reflect the New South Wales countryside of the series, 'A city girl in Central Australia' (1906), certainly appears to contravene a statement Prichard made in 'Some perceptions and aspirations' (1968). In this essay she wrote:

For instance, I travelled to an isolated cattle station four hundred miles beyond the railways of Western Australia to have authentic details for the short story, 'The cooboo'. While the spell of the back country was on me, and sights and scenes of the north-west were still glowing, I wrote *Coonardoo* and *Brumby Innes*. (Prichard, 1968, p. 238).

In fact, during her visit, Prichard expressed a very unfavourable view of her North-West surroundings. In her letter to Hilda Esson of 1 November 1926, already referred to above, she recorded that they were far from spellbinding:

The homestead is of corrugated iron - unlined. The flies and heat and dust - almost unlivable - to us other folk. Flies crawl all over your food, and you just take them off - the dust storm powders your meat while you eat. And at present - we're on salt meat, the flour is flavoured with petrol: butter ran out a few weeks ago, and the new butter has betrayed our confidence. It stinks. No fruit, almost no vegetables - very few green

turnip tops and so on. (Throssell, 1975, p. 50).

A dilemma faces Prichard, in that she cannot simultaneously present an authentic North-West background and maintain the position stated in her letter to Henrietta Drake-Brockman:

Also, everybody seemed to me to be living in the shadow of Lawson. And Lawson's pictures and atmosphere were mostly of a grey and distressing country. I wanted to bring a realization of the beauty and vigour of our life to Australian literature. I think I did use colour when most people were writing in neutral tints. (Drake-Brockman, 1953, p. 214).

Prichard's landscapes have escaped comparison with Lawson's, although his philosophy of 'mateship' is a central structure in her portrayal of pioneering communities and industries. On the other hand, her descriptions of landscapes and working environments have not escaped comparison with the works of D.H. Lawrence. In *Katharine Susannah Prichard* (1967), Drake-Brockman stated that the Lawrentian influence in Prichard's work is 'difficult to discount, notably in *Working Bullocks*, published in 1926'. (Drake-Brockman, 1967, p. 6).

In 'Some perceptions and aspiration' (1968), Prichard denied that Lawrence was of any great significance in the development of her descriptive prose. She stated, not unambiguously: 'Then the cult of D.H. Lawrence dominated English writing. I was not influenced by it more than other writers of my time'. (Prichard, 1968, p. 243).

Prichard had some correspondence with Lawrence during the 1920s. She quoted extracts from these letters in her article, 'Lawrence in Australia' (1950). Overall, it was her contention that Lawrence 'failed as a writer of the first magnitude' because 'he transferred his psychological vagaries, his 'fear of death and impotence', to many of the characters in his novels. Prichard considered that Lawrence's genius was blighted by the 'dross and rubble of those fears' but that 'the beauty of Lawrence's descriptive writing'

would survive. (Prichard, 1950, p. 259).

Comparisons between Prichard and Lawrence were not infrequent and on occasion Lawrence was considered the lesser writer. Muir Holborn's article, 'Katharine Susannah Prichard' (1951), lauds Prichard's work in the following terms: 'It is hard to think of any English-speaking novelist in whose work is felt so constantly the struggle, the tension the active relationship between man and nature'. (Holborn, 1951, p. 236). Holborn goes on to say:

D.H. Lawrence is an author who is often thought of as particularly successful in revealing the man-nature relationship, but in Lawrence the intercourse is nearly always one-sided.... Man's defiance usually ends in squirming defeat and death, unless ... he yields up his essentially human qualities and subsides into some curiously passive state of accord with Nature. Katharine Prichard's chief characters will not acknowledge defeat even in the midst of desolation. They remain resolute in their faith and integrity. Coonardoo, shorn of all hope or consolation, is unbroken. (Holborn, 1951, p. 236).

Richard Sadleir referred to the 'general over-estimation of the writings of Katharine Susannah Prichard' and described the above analysis by Holborn as 'a curious derangement of literary values'. (Sadleir, 1961, p. 31). In fact, the 'resolute ... faith and integrity' of Coonardoo referred to by Holborn is entirely a consequence of Coonardoo's incapacity to understand or react to the events which have destroyed her. Coonardoo's faith is both tragic and misplaced and her passivity so great that she literally becomes part of the natural surroundings in death: 'Her arms and legs, falling apart, looked like those blackened and broken sticks beside the fire'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 206).

Not every literary critic has seen a Lawrentian strain in Prichard's works. Notably, H.M. Green, in *A history of Australian literature* (1961), who stated:

Prichard has been called a disciple of Lawrence: she admires him and for her as for other writers of her period 'he lifted horizons and gave us a confidence of attack', but there is no other resemblance, except perhaps in a couple of passages that were written before she had read any of his

books. (Green, 1961, p. 1010).

This statement is well justified because, as already stated, Prichard's landscapes have their beginnings in her journeys to the back country of New South Wales and Victoria in 1905 and 1906 and, thus, they predate Lawrence's first novel *Sons and Lovers* which was not published until 1913.

Kateryna Arthur in her essay, 'Katharine Susannah Prichard and the negative text' (1984), explored Prichard's presentation of the Australian landscape. Arthur emphasised that Prichard was the pioneer writer of Australian landscape and that she 'put into words what the pioneer painters a century and more before her had struggled to represent on canvas'. (Arthur, 1984, p. 38). Arthur noted that Prichard's scenes are 'painterly rather than photographic' and 'romantic rather than documentary'. (Arthur, 1984, p. 40). Arthur stated that Prichard set herself the task of making Australia less strange for both Australian city dwellers and overseas readers alike. Thus she adopts the conventions of European romanticism with its familiar imagery and is content to create colourful and seductive images of texture and colour. It is Arthur's view that Prichard 'wants to bring the Australian landscape into view and at the same time she wants to recommend it to her readers as a subject worthy of literary attention'. (Arthur, 1984, p. 40).

Literary purpose is an important consideration in Prichard's presentation of landscape in *Coonardoo*. Equally compelling is her deep affection for the Australian countryside. In 'The land I love' (1958), which first appeared in *The home annual* in 1936, Prichard declared: 'I love every inch of Australia'. In lyrical prose she salutes every aspect of the Australian landscape, including the scenery of the North-West with its:

Plains, dove-grey and green, under mallee and curari bush, beyond Meekatharra and the Ashburton, broken by the blue backs of hills like prehistoric monsters: red earth of the gold fields, torn by the shimmering wraiths of salt lakes and dead rivers: the gorgeous tapestry of the sand plains in spring time, woven with wild flowers pink, yellow, saffron, purple, blue and scarlet. (Prichard, 1958, pp. 26-27).

Although, it should be noted, in the same article she had harsh comments to make about aspects of Australian society and culture, which are definitely in the mode of 'socialist realism'.

The topographic features and environmental conditions of the North-West are, of course, merely the starting point of Prichard's text; the necessary foundation for the economic and socio-political dimensions of the novel. The latter being largely in a dependent relationship with the former. For the most part, the text of *Coonardoo* is centred on events and activities related to the industries which developed as a result of the natural resources that were discovered in the North-West following European settlement of the region. Of these, the pastoral industry was the most significant and widespread. The history and development of the pastoral industry during the period mid-1860s to 1920s is the subject of the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **PASTORAL INDUSTRY**

The focus of this chapter is the representation of the pastoral industry in the novel and the reconstruction of the pastoralisation process as it occurred in the historical situation.

Prichard's text, either directly or retrospectively, covers the entire history of pastoral development in the North-West region from the days when the first Leases were taken up in the mid-1860s until the author's own contemporary period when she undertook fieldwork on a North-West cattle station in 1926.

The chapter is divided into two sections, each of which traces a particular aspect of pastoralisation in the region. Initially, a largely descriptive account of European settlement in the region is given, including details of the activities involved in the foundation, development and maintenance of pastoral enterprises. This information is based on contemporary journals, memoirs and family histories and is set against parallel situations and events in *Coonardoo*.

Discussion then centres on the colonisation of the region. Reference is made to the displacement of the Aboriginal people from their traditional homelands. Of particular interest is the erroneous assumption made by both legislators and white settlers that the land of the region was not already under economic management. Documentary evidence is presented relating to the subjugation and coercion of the indigenous people in the pastoral workforce. An exploration is made of the legislative measures taken for

the protection of Aborigines. Again, misapprehension is the foundation of the legislation enacted. This was based on the notion of the inevitable and imminent extinction of the Aboriginal people.

A particular point of study is the contradiction between statements made by the author in the 'Introduction' to the novel, to the effect that Aborigines on remote pastoral stations were well-treated, and the events she portrays in the novel which fails to support this statement.

F.T. Gregory's journal and report of his North-West expedition were presented to Governor Hampton on 6 February 1862. The report was generally favourable in regard to the potential of the region for agricultural and pastoral development. In an Appendix to the report, Gregory stated:

It now only remains for me to give an opinion on the capabilities of the country for colonisation... The total amount of land available for this purpose... I should estimate at not less than two or three millions of acres. (Gregory & Gregory, 1884, p. 96).

Settlement of the North-West commenced soon after F.T. Gregory's report became known. The first settler into the region was Walter Padbury who had earlier ascertained from Gregory that conditions in the region were suitable for a pastoral enterprise. Padbury immediately thereafter prepared for departure. That his aspirations were high is attested to by the report in the *Inquirer* dated 8 April 1863 which read:

Mr Padbury, an active and shrewd colonist, has, on the faith of the explorers' representations, determined at a very heavy cost to form a settlement in the new country...

Upon the success of Mr. Padbury's adventure will, in part, depend the immediate colonization of an entirely new country, and it may be, hereafter, a separate province. (*Inquirer*, 8 April 1863).

The *Inquirer* article noted that Padbury had already purchased a survey vessel, *Mystery*, which had preceded him to the North-West and that he would follow in about a fortnight. The 'Shipping Intelligence' in the *Inquirer* for 29 April 1863 stated that the following expedition would be sailing on that day:

Tien Tsin, 254 tons, J.P. Jarman, commander, for Nicol Bay and DeGrey River, Passengers - Messrs. W. Padbury, M. Samson, S. Ridley, J. McCourt, C. Nairne, D. Brown, W. Jones, G. Sivert, Boy (cook) and 5 natives. Cargo - 11 horses, 6 bullocks, 540 sheep, and provisions. (*Inquirer*, 29 April 1863). [spelling as original].

On arrival at Nichol Bay, Padbury and his party 'sailed into a glorious bay east of Point Lambert which they named "Tien Tsin" harbour after the vessel which brought them to the North-West'. (Taylor, 1980, p. 26). They came ashore on 6 May 1863 not far from the future site of Roebourne, but failed to find sufficient pasturage in the vicinity. Padbury returned to Fremantle, whilst the rest of his party remained and searched for a more suitable site for settlement; which they eventually discovered on the De Grey.

The second settler into the region was John Wellard who left Fremantle aboard the *Tien Tsin* on 8 August 1863. Wellard's party remained at Tien Tsin Harbour and the Manager, William Shakespeare Hall, built a house overlooking the harbour. Wellard's pioneering enterprise consisted of provisions and livestock of 370 sheep, 26 cattle and 9 horses. (De La Rue, 1979, p. 15).

Other settlers followed and J. Battye recorded that by the end of 1863, 'there were three runs of 100 000 acres each being stocked in the newly opened areas'. (Battye, 1924, p. 264). These runs were held by Walter Padbury, John Wellard and C. von Bibra.

Into this area came Emma Withnell, Prichard's textual exemplar of the pioneering white woman who stands by her husband through all the hardships and dangers of frontier life. (Prichard, 1929, p. 118). The Withnell party, under the leadership of Emma's husband,



John, embarked at Fremantle on 23 March 1864. The disasters they encountered on the journey to the North-West would be experienced time and again by settlers entering the region. The story is related by Nancy E. Withnell Taylor, in *Yeera-Muk-A-Doo* (1980).

John and Emma Withnell had set sail aboard the *Sea Ripple* with their two small children; John's brother, Robert; Emma's young siblings, Fanny and John Hancock; and three servants. The Withnells took with them considerable economic goods including livestock of 650 pure bred sheep, draught and saddle horses, cows and sheep dogs. They had sufficient stores to last for the first year, including ten tons of flour, sugar, firearms, tools, farming gear, timber, and clothing. Their planned destination was the De Grey north of Tien Tsin. (Taylor, 1980, p. 33).

The first stage of the Withnells' journey was made in excellent conditions but just before they reached Nichol Bay they encountered rough weather and the ship was swept along in a gale for nearly 200 miles (325 km). Passengers and stock suffered badly, the latter being thrown from their feet and trampled. Finally, the ship foundered on reefs and was badly damaged. As they were close to their intended destination an attempt was made to land the stock on shore but the animals perished by their hundreds in the sea or in the quagmire which formed the coastline.

When the ship was finally repaired, Withnell had to contend with the duplicity of the ship's captain who refused to take the party on to their planned destination. Eventually he agreed to land them at Tien Tsin in return for a further £100 from John Withnell. To resolve the situation, recorded Taylor, 'John gave him a cheque or order on Mr George Shenton, a successful merchant in the Colony, who assisted settlers financially with low rates of interest'. (Taylor, 1980, p. 35).

Eventually, on 14 April 1864, the party arrived at Tien Tsin to receive the very welcome assistance of John Wellard's Manager, William Shakespeare Hall, and overseer, Charles

**McCourt. Taylor recorded: 'It was the accepted custom for a ship, on arrival, to sound a gun shot, with a second shot on landing'. (Taylor, 1980, p. 37). Withnell had followed this practice and Hall had hurried to the relief of the party.**

**Whilst Emma, aged 21 years and very pregnant, camped out on the beach with her small children and sister, surrounded by what remained of their stock and stores, John Withnell, Emma's brother and Charles McCourt set out to try to recover what stock they could from the earlier landing. On this expedition 'they found no trace of the missing stock'. (Taylor, 1980, p. 39). Although, apparently, some stock were eventually recovered.**

**When Withnell returned to Nichol Bay, he found that his bad luck had not abated and that most of his remaining stores had been washed away in a gale. During the search for his livestock, Withnell had made an extensive survey of the country and discovered excellent land on the Harding River and decided to settle there. When the party eventually arrived at the Harding River, 'Emma named the hill behind it Mount Welcome because the party had at last reached a place of rest and refreshment'. (De La Rue, 1979, p. 16).**

**De La Rue noted in regard to the story of Emma Withnell's experiences as told in newspapers and other accounts that: 'Unfortunately, these accounts contradict each other in various details'. (De La Rue, 1979, p. 16). But De La Rue agreed the journey to the North-West was probably accurate in its essential details.**

**Coastal conditions and shipping costs made movement into the region both hazardous and expensive. 'Freight was sometimes as high as 13s. per sheep'. (Gunning, 1952, p. 133). Governor Hampton decided to assist settlement by encouraging the establishment of an overland route. The *Inquirer* reported Hampton's offer of '100 000 acres of land rent free for 12 years to the first overlander who should drive a certain number of stock**

from the settled districts to any spot north of the tropic of Capricorn'. (*Inquirer*, 31 August 1864).

This challenge was accepted by E.T. Hooley, who left Geraldton in May 1866 with 'nearly 2000 sheep'. (Battye, 1924, p. 271) and arrived at Tien Tsin, later named Cossack, on 27 August 1866. The excitement of his arrival can be gauged from the words of Trevarton Sholl:

Great and glorious news for Tien Tsin, Hooley has arrived!! - This most indefatigable explorer arrived here at 1 pm. He has been just three months from the Geraldine Mine, lost only eight sheep en route, had not the slightest difficulty in bringing his drays across, found plenty of water & a first rate dray route the whole way. (T.C. Sholl, Journal, p. 143; quoted in De La Rue, 1979, p. 115).

The Government's eagerness to expand settlement in the North-West region induced it to offer extremely liberal terms and conditions for land allocation in the *Land Act, 1862* (WA). The government's land regulations were published in the *Government Gazette of Western Australia* for Tuesday, 23 December 1862 and came into force on 1 January 1863.

These Regulations divided the land into two classes: Class A lands were to be held on an annual License and comprised 'all land within two miles of the Sea Coast, including the adjacent Islands'; and Class C lands provided for more 'extended occupation' and included all remaining land. An application for permission to proceed to the North for the purpose of occupying land under the Regulations was necessary and once granted the permission remained valid for twelve months.

**Section 4 of the Regulations provided:**

**Free pasturage for the Stock enumerated in an application, and for their natural increase will be allowed on the unappropriated Lands... for the space of twelve months from the date of their arrival therein; and within this period, runs not exceeding (100 000) one hundred thousand acres for any one Establishment, may be selected. (*Land Act, 1862 (WA)*, s. 4).**

**The annual rent of both Classes was 5/- per 1000 acres for the first four years, and 10/- per 1000 acres thereafter.**

**Section 8 stated:**

**Leases and Licenses will be transferable while chargeable with rent, on its being shown to the satisfaction of the Governor that they have been properly stocked. (*Land Act, 1862 (WA)*, s. 8).**

In Prichard's text the original owner of Wyaliba station, Saul Hardy, enters the North-West in the early days, at which time he 'tramped up and down the Nor'-West, droving, and loading stores'. Eventually he 'had taken up that stretch of Wyaliba country'. But he very quickly discovers that he is not suited to the life of a squatter. The text states: 'He had been a rolling stone too long to sit down in one place'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). When drought and financial hardship cause Hardy to sell his Lease to Ted and Bessie Watt, the novel is describing a situation which was not unusual; many pastoral ventures failed or were abandoned in the early years of settlement.

The first Lessees, John Wellard and Walter Padbury, very quickly disposed of the Leases they had been granted. Wellard sold his Lease No. 1. of 100 000 acres on the Harding River in 1866 to W. Burges & Co for an undisclosed sum which was believed to have been in excess of £2000. (Taylor, 1980, p. 108; De La Rue, 1979, p. 16).

Wellard retained an interest in the North as his daughter married A.R. Richardson who owned Pyramid station and Wellard made many visits there. (Taylor, 1980, p. 109).

Padbury allowed his Lease No. 2. to expire on 3 August 1867.

Cara Cammilleri in her article, 'Walter Padbury 1820-1907: pioneer, pastoralist, merchant and philanthropist' (1971), detailed the circumstances surrounding Padbury's withdrawal from the North-West. This had been occasioned, in part, by the loss of his ship, *Emma*, with all on board, including his brother-in-law, Charles Nairn. Cammilleri stated:

After this loss, and owing to the low price of wool then ruling, Padbury and his friends were so disheartened that they decided to abandon the country.... Padbury had the stock removed in 1868, leaving behind wool press, buildings, and a quantity of other property.

Padbury's reason for abandoning the station was that it yielded no return but rather was a constant financial drain. (Cammilleri, 1971, p. 55).

Many of the early Leases were abandon. W.B. Kimberly recorded:

During the year [1867] nine runs, comprising 1 015 000 acres, lapsed in the north-west districts, but others were taken up; the number of selections held at the end of the year was sixty-one, representing 5 805 000 acres against forty-nine runs and 4 720 000 acres in December 1866. Two of these runs were surrendered in 1868 when the figures stood:- Fifty-nine runs, 5 605 000 acres. The statistics of stock in the north-west in December, 1868 were:- sheep, 38 580; cattle, 444; horses, 208; and goats, 23. (Kimberly, 1897, p. 211).

In *Coonardoo*, textual evidence suggests that Saul Hardy had first arrived in the North-West prior to 1870. The text states: 'He had brought cattle west from the Queensland border in the early days'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 9). In fact, cattle did not arrive in Western Australia from Queensland until about the mid-1880s. Norman Bartlett in *The pearl seekers* (1954) recounted the reminiscences of an 'old cattleman' who stated that it was not until 'eighty-three or 'eighty-four' that the first cattle had been brought into Western Australia from Queensland. Bartlett's informant recalled: 'Bluey Buchanan was the first into the Kimberleys with cattle... although the Duracks were pretty hard on Buchanan's

heels'. He also noted that: 'In those days there were plenty of cattle moving from Queensland into the Northern Territory but nobody coming as far West as this'. (Bartlett, 1954, pp. 173-174).

Essentially, the North-West was a wool growing region. R.D. Sturkey's thesis, *Growth of the pastoral industry in the North West 1862-1901* (1957), recorded that 8 bales of 'dirty unpressed wool' were sent south as early as 1863 and that exports of wool from the North-West had increased to 294 bales by 1868. The prosperity of the settlers depended upon the price of wool which steadily increased during the early phases of development. Sturkey quotes the price per lb obtained by Alex McRae who received an average of 10 1/4d in 1869; 19d in 1871 and 21 1/2d in 1872. (Sturkey, 1957, p. 14). But from the mid-1870s, wool prices began to fall; from an average of 18d per lb in 1875 to only 9d per lb in 1891. (Sturkey, 1957, p. 17).

In the 'real life' situation, cattle were not considered economically viable in the early settlement period. De La Rue recorded that as late as 1877 Farquhar McRae reported:

Sheep farming appears to be the only investment that is likely to pay here now, and stations are hard to be got. I have 4 or 500 head of cattle here now but they are not much good to me as I cannot sell them and there is little demand for Beef... it would not pay to start a station with cattle here. (F. McRae to his father, 11 February 1877, quoted in De La Rue, 1979, p. 68).

The cattle industry did not develop in the North-West until after World War I. (De La Rue, 1979, p.68). Although it should be noted that records dating from the end of the nineteenth century reveal that at that period there were cattle runs in the vicinity of Turee Station: notably the McCay brothers stations at Roy Hill and Ethel Creek.

This fact is mentioned by Elizabeth Salter in her biography of Daisy Bates, *Daisy Bates: the great white queen of the Never Never* (1971). Salter relates the history of the Bates's

acquisition of their cattle station in the local government district of Windell; the district in which Turee Station is also located. Wealthy pastoralists in the area, the McCay brothers, had reason to be grateful to Jack Bates who had developed a vaccine against 'pleuro', an infectious and fatal disease in cattle, which was decimating the McCay herd. Bates thereby saved the McCays from considerable economic loss and in return the McCays showed him a parcel of good pastoral land available in the area. The land consisted of 183 000 acres of excellent pasture in the Ophthalmia Ranges close to Ethel Creek, and Salter stated: 'Any man prepared to work it could make money'. (Salter, 1971, p. 67). In about the year 1900, the Bates family took up the cattle run and named it 'Glen Carrick'. The land was offered for sale in June 1912. (Salter, 1971, p. 152). The following advertisement appeared:

Glencarrick. Three lots, two at 50 000 acres, one at 83 000 acres. Near Nullagine. Annual rental of house £23. No improvements. Little fencing required on account of Ophthalmia Range. Water at 20 feet. Also from Fortescue River. The Estate close to the Goldfields Stock Route. Brand of 200 lost head of cattle. Price 500. (Quoted in Salter, 1971, p. 154).

Salter stated that the advertisement 'tells its own story'. The Bates family obviously were not 'prepared to work' their North-West property.

The early development of Wyaliba was under just such desultory management. Saul Hardy expended no greater energy than 'to sit down in one place, breed cattle and wait for them to grow'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 9). Such a minimal effort would scarcely have made it possible for Hardy to meet the £500 annual rent requirements of his one million acre Lease let alone acquire 'three thousand head of cattle'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). Hardy's indolence does not accord well with the purposeful activity needed by the early settlers when they entered untried country to establish their pastoral properties.

The actual work involved in establishing a pastoral station is outlined in diary entries recorded by Alexander Robert Richardson and published as: *Early memories of the*

*great Nor-West and a chapter in the history of W.A.* (1909; 1914). This later date refers to an updated and expanded version which included many of his early diary entries.

Richardson was a member of the Portland Squatting Company, formed in Victoria in the year 1864, which arrived at Tien Tsin aboard the *Maria Ross* on 2 April 1865. Not quite 18 years old when he arrived, Richardson was associated with the development of the region throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century. He went on to develop the Pyramid and the De Grey stations. He was elected Member of the Legislative Assembly for the De Grey from 1890-1897 and was Minister for Lands 1894-1897. Thereafter he resigned to become a Trustee of the Agricultural Bank. (The Bicentennial Dictionary of Western Australia, Vol. 4. p. 2615). Richardson's memoirs of his experiences of setting up his pastoral station during the early phase of white settlement in the North-West can be set against events and situations depicted in Prichard's text to reveal the extent to which it does, in the words of Roman Jakobson, 'accurately depict life by displaying verisimilitude'. (Jakobson, 1978, p. 20).

Richardson's memoirs indicated that the establishment of a pastoral station required the expenditure of every ounce of mental and physical energy:

from the day you get your approval of the government granting you a lease of the land until you can turn it out a going and, let us hope, a paying concern, with homestead buildings, station yards, hundreds of miles of fencing, sheep paddocks, water wells, dams, and in the present day windmills, troughs, outstation yards. (Richardson, 1909, p. 39).

Purposeful economic development of Wyaliba commences only after ownership passes to the Watt family. It is more particularly related to the enterprise of Bessie Watt than to her husband: 'As a matter of fact, everybody knew she had been responsible for the management and working of the station, ever since she and Ted bought out Saul Hardy'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). Bessie could fit into Kay Schaffer's paradigm of the bush woman of Australian fiction, who in 'exceptional circumstances' can become a 'pioneering hero' able to 'stand in place of her husband, lover or brother and take on masculine attributes



of strength, fortitude, courage and the like in her battle with the environment'. (Schaffer, 1988, p.14).

But Bessie Watt is not able to entirely dispense with male assistance. The text states:

She talked wells and well-sinking with Charley half the night, costing and depths, and worked with him on a map she had made of Wyaliba, where wells ought to be sunk; where they could best be sunk. (Prichard, 1929, p. 13).

Richardson's account of his entrepreneurial endeavours in the pastoral industry are given in highly moralistic tones. He speaks of his 'years of patient work, planning detail, management and anxious thought and care' and of the 'years of anxious and economical contriving to obtain the needful funds for all these necessary improvements'. (Richardson, 1909, p. 39).

Financial contrivance is the province of Bessie Watt. It is Mrs Bessie who 'brought off the deal with Saul Hardy: Ted could never have worked out, and brought off a deal like that'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 9). Conflicting accounts of the transaction are given. The text states 'she planked down all the money they had saved for years', suggesting that the money is in the form of cash having been hoarded and kept in the Watts' possession, but the next paragraph refers to the same negotiations in terms of a more sophisticated monetary transaction: 'Mrs Bessie made her bargain, wrote a cheque for a couple of hundred pounds'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). Either situation is possible, as banking facilities had been in place in the colony since June 1837. (Battye, 1924, p. 143). On the other hand, they were not available in the North-West. R. D. Sturkey recorded:

It was not until the 'eighties that a Bank was established at Roebourne. Until then the supply of money in the district had been scarce and purchases from local stores were paid for either by wool or pearl shell. (Sturkey, 1957, p. 25).

**The desire to remove Ted from the temptations of alcohol had been the impetus for Bessie's purchase of Wyaliba: 'She had an idea if they got a place of their own she could keep him away from the pubs'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). But this is one of Bessie's plans that fails and Ted meets his death in a fall from the 'balcony of a hotel in Karrara'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). Thereafter, Bessie continues with her plans to develop Wyaliba but now the incentive is to provide an unencumbered inheritance for her son:**

**She was determined to pay off the mortgage and hand the station over to Hugh without 'a monkey on it'. Meanwhile she worked with an energy and obstinacy which never flagged. (Prichard, 1929, p. 13).**

**Bessie becomes obsessed with securing Hugh's future. Everything is sacrificed and daily living impoverished to that end: 'hard and meagre the life on Wyaliba had been all those years Mrs Bessie was making the station for Hugh'. Bessie ignores her social obligations: 'If a drover or prospector strayed into Wyaliba there was no whisky'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 27). In this respect Wyaliba station differs greatly from the historic situation in regard to hospitality on pastoral properties. At Mount Welcome station, for example, the home of the Withnell family:**

**sick or weary travellers were assured of an hospitable reception, no matter how tired the family was, how hard the day had been, or what time of the day or night they were called upon. Lonely young lads away from home found Emma maternal to them.....some of whom she had nursed back to health after a severe sickness. (Taylor, 1980, p. 74).**

**Bessie's lack of hospitality to itinerant white men was occasioned not only by her parsimonious nature but for fear that they might jeopardise her economic goals by causing trouble in the Aboriginal labour camp:**

**White stockmen she refused to have on the place, because she said they would only make trouble about their gins with Warieda and Chitali, who were the best stockmen in the country. (Prichard, 1929, p. 14).**

**But Bessie's relentless dedication to the development of Wyaliba is not without personal cost and as her bank balance grows so does the cancer in her stomach: 'always the pain was there. She moaned and groaned half the night'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 28). But Bessie sees the fulfilment of her dream for Hugh and Wyaliba. When Hugh returns from school she declares:**

**'Welcome home, my laddie. It's all yours.' She waved her hand to the wide plains and far hills. 'I've done the best I could with it for you.'**  
**(Prichard, 1929, p. 30).**

**During Hugh's schooldays, the text states: 'The seasons were good, and Mrs Bessie was very busy all those years Hugh was away at school'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 13). But from an historical perspective the period during which Hugh was at school, approximately 1885 to 1898, had been a time of financial hardship in the North-West. R.D. Sturkey recorded that:**

**In 1876 then, the Nor'west pastoral industry entered a depression which lasted about two decades. During these years, there were two particularly serious slumps - in 1877 and 1890/92, and it is unfortunate that drought co-incided with each. (Sturkey, 1957, p. 17).**

**In about the year 1898, Hugh takes over the management of Wyaliba cattle station. He remains in ownership, according to textual evidence, until about 1926 when a combination of circumstances forces him to relinquish the holding. His economic ruin is occasioned by a series of disasters and failures. The station has a long run of drought seasons: 'Again and again Wyaliba missed the rains when almost every other station inland below the twentieth parallel got it'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 195). He also fails to keep abreast with trends in the pastoral industry, and regretfully he tells Phyllis: 'If only we'd switched on to sheep - when everybody else did. But I've been afraid of the dogs.'**  
**(Prichard, 1929 p. 174). He has been relying on an unstable export market for his horses in Singapore and the Straits Settlements; and at home, with the advent of motor transport: 'The bottom had fallen out of the market for horses'. Consequently, large**

mobs of horses roam the plains and have become a pest. (Prichard, 1929, p. 194). The heavily mortgaged station is eventually lost to 'Sam Geary [who] would probably buy and work the place from Nuniewarra'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 201).

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I should now like to consider a second and parallel strand in the history of the North-West pastoral industry: the colonisation process and the subjugation and displacement of the region's Aboriginal inhabitants. This aspect of pastoralisation is not directly confronted in *Coonardoo*; although it is a silence which is not remarkable given the era in which Prichard wrote. Susan Sheridan in her essay, 'Women writers' (1988), stated: 'In fictional representations of Aboriginal people in the period before 1967 there is a near-total silence about the history of colonisation'. (Sheridan, 1988, p. 331).

The text of *Coonardoo* in no way contradicts this view. The colonial process, in so far as it is ventilated at all, is presented in a series of anecdotes characterised by historical closure; being confined to the personal reminiscences of Saul Hardy. Hardy states: 'Thirty years I've been in this country, and there's things I've seen....' (Prichard, 1929, p. 104). Hardy's exposition of interracial encounters and competing land uses is excessively simplistic. He states:

'You can't help seein' the blacks' point of view. White men came, jumped their hunting grounds, went kangaroo shooting for fun. The blacks speared cattle. White men got shootin' blacks to learn 'em. Blacks speared a white man or two - police rode out on a punishing expedition.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 105).

The text adds nothing to the store of social knowledge as these situations were common knowledge when Prichard wrote her novel.

Saul also refers to the widely-known practice of chaining Aborigines after they had been

arrested by police or when they had been kidnapped for pearling crews. The police, Saul says:

'Used to bring the niggers in, in chains, leather straps round the neck, fastened to their stirrup irons. Twenty or thirty like that, and I've seen the soles of a boy's feet raw when he came in.

'And there was black-birding too.... I've seen blacks brought in, in chains for the pearlers' crews. Only on a certain part of the coast though.'  
(Prichard, 1929, p. 105).

Saul specifies that it is the police and pearlers rather than the pastoralists who are responsible for the arrests and chaining of Aboriginal prisoners. Saul states:

'The police was makin' a good thing out of "punitive expeditions".'  
(Prichard, 1929, p. 105).

This was frequently true. Peter Biskup in *Not slaves not citizens: the Aboriginal problem in Western Australia, 1898-1954* (1973), stated: 'Since a constable could claim a daily living allowance of 24 cents [18d] "per knob" for all aborigines arrested, women and children were usually brought in as "witnesses" in order to swell the number of prisoners'. (Biskup, 1973, pp. 32-33).

These payments made a useful addition to police pay especially as very little was spent on feeding the prisoners. Saul Hardy makes the point: 'Never spent eighteen pence a nob on 'em either. Police'd let one or two men hunt for the rest, bring in kangaroo.'  
(Prichard, 1929, p. 105). At the same time, many arrests were at the instigation of station owners who required the police to hunt down and return runaway Aboriginal workers to their white 'owners'.

The text never really grapples with the disruptive forces of colonisation: displacement of the Aborigines from their homelands destroyed the foundations of their cultural and spiritual life just as surely as the pastoral process destroyed the substructure of their

**economic life.**

**The white owners of Wyaliba do not question their right to occupy the land. They consider that it is morally and legally theirs by virtue of the physical energy and financial resources that they have expended on its development. As already noted, Bessie has no unease when she gives the land to Hugh, stating:**

**'It's all yours.' She waved her hand to the wide plains and far hills. 'I've done the best I could with it for you.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 30).**

**A.R. Richardson's memoirs gave voice to a similar view when he reflected on the mindset of the white colonist confronting for the first time the land and people to be colonised. Of particular relevance was the notion that the land was not already under Aboriginal economic management. Richardson reflected on the initial phase of settlement:**

**In those times sturdy, self reliant settlers went forth to subdue the wilderness at their own charges, staked their all, including the hazard of their lives, and by their efforts, their enterprise and their brains converted that which was valueless, because no one wanted it or cared to take the risk commercial and actual, of occupying it, into a national asset and source of wealth. (Richardson, 1914, p. 37).**

**On the same day he first came ashore in the North-West Richardson had recorded his reflections on the morality of dispossessing the original owners of the land. His diary entry on that day in April 1865 comments that the presence of the 'more numerous savages, naked and black might be accepted rather as evidence that the white man is only an intruder' and that after a hurried look around the white man must quickly evacuate the country he so avidly longs for but which is the possession of the numerous Aborigines. Richardson continues:**

**Timid prudence, or even cautious expediency, might thus counsel, but a very bold and confident 'No,' is not only the voice but the very attitude of**

the pioneer. He feels himself (or he should do so) both intellectually and morally superior to the savage tribes. (Richardson, 1914, p. 20).

Richardson's diary entry goes on to debate whether or not it is superior weaponry rather than superiority of race which gives the Europeans the right to possess the land. He concludes that 'might is right' because the *sine qua non* of producing superior weaponry is racial superiority. Richardson believed that racial superiority also gave the European settlers the right to colonise the indigenous people, stating:

In some such conscious mood then we look around on these savages so greatly superior in number, and at once, almost as an instinct, assume the superior tone of command and the attitude of superiority. They are told to minister to the wants and requirements of the numerically insignificant company, to fetch water, light fires, carry wood, etc. (Richardson, 1914, p. 21).

In similar vein, Bessie Watt addresses the station Aborigines when Hugh takes over the running of the station. And there is more than a suggestion of threat concealed in her words; in fact she is verbalising the virtual enslavement of the Aborigines:

Mumae [Bessie] told Chitali, Warieda and the rest of them that Hugh was master of Wyaliba now. They were to serve and obey him as they had her, and all would be well with them. (Prichard, 1929, pp. 30-31).

There is a certain sense of ambivalence in Richardson's statements about the white presence on the land. There is a momentary hesitation in his argument that the whites' supposed superiority of race 'might' not constitute a more valid claim to the land than the Aborigines' greater numbers and priority of occupation. There is also evidence of disquiet in his avoidance of the moral question in favour of the practical one of 'prudence' or 'expediency'.

Although Prichard's text does not directly confront the subject of colonisation, there is some sense of unease in regard to Hugh's ownership of the land. This is revealed in the

passage which sees Hugh and the Aborigines in partnership in relationship to the land:

Through his love of the country and of Wyaliba, Hugh realized, was woven regard for the people who had grown in and were bound to it. To the country he had attached himself with a stubbornness there was no thwarting or denying; and the people who served and fought it with him, claimed his loyalty, protection. (Prichard, 1929, p. 100).

The partnership is, of course, illusory because the Aborigines' labour has been obtained by the threat that their well-being depends on their serving and obeying Hugh. By describing Hugh's attachment to the land as one of 'love' or 'stubbornness' Prichard diverts attention from the question of Hugh's moral right to attach himself to the land. Fighting the land together suggests a camaraderie between Hugh and the Aborigines but it also questions the notion of 'love' and is contrary to the Aborigines' traditional interaction with the land. Prichard's use in this passage, and elsewhere in the text, of the Aboriginal notion of 'growing in' the land could possibly be seen as a device to restrict their bond with the land to their present lifetime and to deny their ancestral title to it.

No real problem regarding ownership of the land is recorded in the text which presents a seamless transfer of the land from Aboriginal to white ownership. The transfer is conceived as ultimately to the benefit of both parties:

Neither Saul Hardy nor Mumae had ever experienced trouble with Wyaliba folk. Generous, kindly their relationship had been, in an overlordship imposed, gradually and imperceptibly, until the blacks recognised and accepted it, by conditions of work for food and clothing. (Prichard, 1929, p. 100).

In the historical situation, Aboriginal resistance to white settlement in the Ashburton district had been particularly strong. Turee Station, the prototype Wyaliba, is situated on a tributary of the Ashburton. F.W. Gunning recorded that in 1866 E.T. Hooley established a station on the Ashburton but: 'Having settled there, he found that the natives were fiercely hostile, and after a few years he was compelled to abandon the holding'. In a footnote, Gunning stated: 'The Ashburton had a decidedly evil reputation



as 'the white man's grave' and for some years no one attempted to settle in that good pastoral country'. (Gunning, 1952, p. 133).

Lockier Clere Burges, an early settler, recorded his experiences during the time he was left in charge of E.T. Hooley's station on the Ashburton:

The natives killed some of his men as well as a native from the 'Swan' and also threatened the lives of the party in Mr Hooley's absence. The trouble grew so great that the resident magistrate of Roebourne, Mr. Sholl, had to send a party down to the 'Ashburton' to the relief of Mrs. Hooley and the other people there.... The relief party had a big fight with the natives, who were very hostile at that time. (Burges, 1913, p. 32).

De La Rue recorded that Mrs Hooley, 'following a visit to Perth, had said that she would never go back to the North West'. (De La Rue, 1979, p. 24).

De La Rue noted that the early settlers who were successful in establishing stations had certain factors in common: they 'were young, and many were unencumbered with a family'. (De La Rue, 1979, p. 24). Thus, the absence of white women does not seem to have been detrimental to the economic development of the region. This situation runs counter to the central structural thesis of Prichard's novel, which J. J. Healy elucidated as:

What station life in the outback needed was white women, freed of pretension, who recognised the nature of the task their men faced in settling the land. (Healy, 1978, p. 145).

The notion of the pioneering woman 'freed from pretension', if the phrase is to be interpreted as 'abandoning the feminine role assigned to her by the civilised sector of society', is countered by Susan Hunt in *Spinifex and Hessian* (1986). Hunt recorded that the role of the pioneering woman in the North-West was in no way different from that of her southern counterpart, entirely centred on home duties. Hunt stated: 'rather than a view of these women as participating in and contributing to a "pioneering venture" the

landed woman's role was often seen in terms of female dedication and self-sacrifice for her mate and her family'. (Hunt, 1986, p. 38).

Family life may have added to the anxieties of the settler. Gunning recorded that when Hooley's station was taken over by the Forrest family and Septimus Burt in 1876, young David Forrest who took control 'nearly died at the hands of a treacherous native. He had to make the coffins of his first and second children born there and himself had read the burial service for them'. (Gunning, 1952, p. 133).

A.R. Richardson and L.C. Burges published accounts of their experiences during the first days of settlement in the North-West, but neither of them provided any details of the exact means by which the original owners of the soil were dispossessed of their land. A clue could possibly be found in Paul Hasluck's *Black Australians: a survey of native policy in Western Australian, 1829-1897* (1942). Hasluck recorded that during 1867 a memorial was drawn up requesting the 'withdrawal of all Government authority from the district' so that 'settlers might work out their own salvation'. (Hasluck, 1942, p. 180). Hasluck notes that this memorial was signed by, amongst others, Richardson and L.C. Burges, and that the latter had been responsible for drafting it.

Violent clashes between white settlers and Aborigines are referred to in J.T. Reilly's *Reminiscences of fifty years residence in Western Australia* (1903). Reilly stated that:

I have before me the diary of exploration trips in the north-west (by the late T.C. Sholl) in the sixties, and here and there I come across entries coolly set down like this:- 'shot a native today to deter the rest of the tribe'; 'came across about 100 natives this morning, seven or eight shots were fired among them, could not tell how many of them were hit'; 'saw any amount of niggers to-day, obliged to "pepper" the lot'; 'killed a native among a hostile crowd this morning'; 'tracked up three natives at Barlee's spring and shot them'; 'one native had nine balls in him, his entrails protruding, but he closed in, and threw a spear; another shot was fired; he stooped to pick up another spear and fell dead'; and so on *ad nauseum*. (Reilly, 1903, p. 375-376).

The situation which developed in the North-West between the white settlers and Aborigines was, obviously, not uniform throughout the region. Discussing the settlement process throughout Western Australia, Hasluck stated that: 'It would be true to say that there were large numbers of settlers in every district whose treatment of natives was wise, considerate and, to use the word they themselves favoured, "humane", and that their relations were unmarked by any violence'. At the same time, Hasluck admits that there is a 'grim' side to the early stages of contact which 'left antagonism between the races'. (Hasluck, 1942, p. 179).

Prichard's text distances the settlers from atrocities against Aborigines by distinguishing between their treatment in coastal towns and on pastoral stations. This is made clear in the narration in relation to Mollie, whose attitude is summarised as: 'Coming from one of the coastal towns, she had acquired the belief that it was a divine right of white men to ride rough-shod over anything aboriginal which stood in their way'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 104).

It is Mollie's belief that 'the abos are filthy and treacherous'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 104).

This is denied by Saul who states: 'No, girl... they're not treacherous - except when they've been treacherously dealt with.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 105). But, noticeably, it is not unambiguously denied. Mollie is expressing a widely held view of the 'treacherous' Aborigines. J.T. Reilly claims that in some instances the Aborigines had been the aggressors and that: 'In the early days the natives were both cruel and treacherous, and very often they really deserved the harsh treatment meted out to them by the settlers'. (Reilly, 1903, p. 375).

The Aborigines' loss of autonomy is masked in the text by the paternalism of the Watt family. This situation is reflected in the name 'Mumae' that the Aborigines give to Bessie Watt. Hugh explains that in the dialect of the station Aborigines 'Mumae' means 'father'. Hugh tells Mollie: 'mother was proud of their name for her. It meant mother and

father really.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 92). Thus the hierarchy of power is disguised as familial in constitution.

It is interesting to note that one of the few alterations made to the text of the *Bulletin's* serial version of *Coonardoo* when it appeared as a novel, emphasises the paternal nature of the power relationship.

Chapter 13 in the *Bulletin* ends with the scene in which Hugh has just returned to Wyaliba with his new bride, Mollie. Observing that the homestead has been neglected during his absence, Hugh assures Mollie that the Aborigines will be set to cleaning it the following day. The chapter ends with the words: 'Tomorrow everything'll be fresh and sweet as a new pin.' (Prichard, *Bulletin* 10 October, 1928, p. 51)

Chapter 13 in the novel includes these words but a scene has been added which presents Hugh distributing gifts to the Aborigines in the mode of a father returning to his children:

'Here you fellows, how about some rations?'

The blacks crowded to the kitchen door. 'Here Joey, Warieda, and you, Meenie!' Hugh called, naming two or three to come into the kitchen and pass on food as he portioned it out. When he opened the flour-bin, moths flew out, spiders had woven their webs over the sugar. But they were liberal rations every man, woman and child on Wyaliba got that evening. There were apples and boiled lollies in the packs on the buggy, and Hugh dispensed them with tobacco and tins of jam, promising new boots, trousers, hats, pipes, gina-ginas and goodness knows what not, when he visited the store next morning. (Prichard, 1929, pp. 80-81).

Prichard's intention is to portray a beneficent paternalism but the subtextual message conveyed is that the Aborigines have lost their adult status: childlike they depend on Hugh for food and clothing. During Hugh's absence from the station the people at the uloo have come close to starvation. They cannot revert to their traditional hunting and gathering lifestyle because the pastoral process has destroyed their hunting lands:

The men had gone out hunting and brought in a kangaroo or two, but most of the kangaroos were so poor that they could not be used and had to be hung on a tree as a warning to the spirit responsible for growing kangaroos that this was all the goods provided were fit for. (Prichard, 1929, p. 75).

The textual implication is that it is the spirit world which has failed the Aborigines. Thus it diverts attention from the colonial process that has produced the conditions which force the Wyaliban Aborigines to work on their own land for the benefit of their dispossessors.

Very early in the history of settlement, Aboriginal labour became essential to the pastoralists and C.D. Rowley, in *The destruction of Aboriginal society: Aboriginal policy and practice* (1970), stated that: 'by the end of the 1860s the Aboriginal labour camp had become an essential adjunct of the station economy'. (Rowley, 1970, p. 68). The early holders of Government land grants had requested the services of convicts and ticket-of-leave men, but due to the difficulties of supervision neither of these classes of prisoner was allowed north of the Murchison River.

Aboriginal labour was essential to the pastoralists. Neville Green writes: 'The pastoralists made serfs of any Aborigines crossing "their" land'. (Green, 1981, p. 101). Many Aborigines found themselves part of station work forces when they made their crosses on documents they did not understand. They were then forced to work for the pastoralist and became virtually his property. Moreover, as stated above, when they absconded they were forcibly returned to their station owners by the police.

R.D. Sturkey, on the other hand, presented a relationship of mutual benefit between the races. By 1868, he stated, because of the acute labour shortage, the pastoralists came to rely on their Aboriginal workforce and a relationship of mutual benefit developed. In return for the Aborigines' labour, '[t]he settlers offered the aborigines food, protection

from the warrior tribesmen on the Tableland, and treatment during sickness'. (Sturkey, 1957, p. 14). C.D. Rowley adds a further inducement to Aboriginal groups to enter station camps: 'the danger of being caught out in the bush by armed settlers'. (Rowley, 1970, p. 192).

The process by which Aborigines were converted from traditional life to pastoral workers appears to have been extremely rapid. One pastoralist, George Gooch, preferred Aboriginal to white labour and stated that he was entirely dependent upon his newly acquired Aboriginal labour force for the running of his sheep station. Writing from Wandagee station in May 1886, he stated:

The sheep are shepherded by natives and I hope to utilize their labour in other ways, such as tanking and fencing.... Six years ago they never saw a white man. No white man had ever trodden here. Last season they shored over 10 000 sheep for me. I merely mention this to show that a poor man could not do without them. (quoted in Green, 1981, p. 101).

Gooch stated that white shearers 'would not risk their lives to come such long distances from the southern areas to shear a few sheep' and that Aborigines found shearing 'was congenial and being congregated enabled the natives to hold their corroborees each week-end at least, and sometimes nightly'. (Gunning, 1952, p. 72).

In *Coonardoo* the work of the cattle station is carried out entirely by Aboriginal labour; but always under white supervision. In Hugh's absence, Saul is left in charge of the station even though Hugh admits: 'Warieda and Chitali know as much about running things as I do.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 67). The textual pretext is that Saul would be 'sore' if control fell to anyone else; but essentially, the text cannot conceive of Aborigines working in anything but a subordinate position to whites.

Bessie Watt's method of controlling the Aboriginal workers on Wyaliba is described by Hugh, who states:

**'Mother handled them extraordinarily well. It's the iron hand in the velvet glove does the trick, she used to say. Was very strict about some things. Respected them and their ideas. Made 'em respect hers.'** (Prichard, 1929, p. 84).

This was a view that was also stated by H.G.B. Mason in his memoirs, *Darkest West Australia: a treatise bearing on the habits and customs of the Aborigines and the solution of 'the native question': guide to outback settlers* (1909). Mason wrote:

**Treating a native properly does not constitute lavishing presents and rations on him one day and abusing or kicking him the next, but a uniform procedure of firmness, without familiarity and the fulfilment of any promise made to him, with sufficient food and clothing for his actual requirements and a reasonable amount of work, without overdoing it.** (Mason, 1909, p. 40).

The first attempt to control the working conditions of Aborigines in the pastoral industry was the legislation enacted in *The Aborigines Protection Act, 1886* (WA). The stated purpose of the Act was: 'to provide for the better protection and management of the Aboriginal Natives of Western Australian, and to amend the law relating to certain Contracts with such Aboriginal Natives'.

The provisions contained in *The Aborigines Protection Act, 1886* (WA) were based on assumptions regarding the Aboriginal population that had been stated in the *Report of a commission appointed by His Excellency the Governor to inquire into the treatment of Aboriginal native prisoners of the Crown in this colony: and also into certain other matters relative to Aboriginal natives*, known as the Forrest Commission Report of 1884, to the effect that the extinction of the Aborigines was only a matter of time. The Report declared:

**It is a melancholy fact that throughout Australia the Aboriginal Race is fast disappearing, and that progress of settlement by Europeans means in this Colony and in all parts of Australia, as it does in many other parts of the world, the gradual extinction of native races, who have for ages**

existed upon the land previous to the advent of the white man...

We have no hope that the Aboriginal native will ever be more than a servant of the white man and therefore our aim should be devoted to such instruction as will enable him to live usefully and happily among the white population. (*Western Australia Votes and Proceedings of Parliament*, 1884, No. 32).

Hugh certainly believes that the Aborigines are disappearing. He recalls: 'Dirty, diseased, ill natured, lost to their tribal law and customs, he had seen them, remnants of a dying race, drifting about the up-country towns and settlements along the coast'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 100). Hugh also subscribes to the view that Aboriginal workers are incapable of competing in the white workforce. He tells Mollie: 'But you must never work them too hard - specially gins. They're not made for hard work, can't stand it.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 92).

*The Aborigines Protection Act, 1886* (WA) was designed to ease the last days of the Aborigines and to protect them from ill-treatment and exploitation. For this purpose an Aborigines Protection Board was established under the authority of the Governor. The Board controlled 'monies allocated by the Legislative Council for the benefit of Aborigines'. It was responsible for all measures of relief and the care of Aboriginal children. Protectors of Aborigines were appointed to 'report to the Board on the wants and treatment of Aborigines and their contracts of service and employment'.

The Act stipulated that a contract of employment had to be in writing and had to specify the nature and duration of service, which could not exceed twelve months. Additionally, it had to specify exactly what would be supplied to the Aborigine in terms of 'substantial, good, and sufficient rations, clothing, and blankets, and also medicines and medical attendance when practicable and necessary, unless the illness of the Aboriginal be caused by his own improper act or default'.

Section 44 of the Act retained the provisions of the 'Masters and Servants Amendment



Ordinance, 1868' and its 'Amendment, 1886', whereby the maximum penalty for breach of engagement, contract, or service could not exceed the sum of Ten pounds, or one month imprisonment with or without hard labor. (*The Aborigines Protection Act, 1886* (WA), s. 44).

It should be noted that the provisions of *The Aborigines Protection Act, 1886* (WA) relating to the employment of Aborigines, applied only to those who entered into contracts; there were very few of these. In 1905 Commissioner Roth stated: 'The proportion of natives under contract... to natives actually employed is one in twelve'. (Roth Report, 1905, p. 8).

Many of the abuses that were remedied in *The Aborigines Protection Act, 1886* (WA) were re-introduced by a series of Acts passed in the 1890s. These measures reinstated flogging; increased the penalties for breach of contract in the case of an employee to three months but reduced the employer's penalty to a nominal fine; and removed the disqualification of employers sitting as Justices of the Peace in cases concerning their own employees. As a result of these changes, Biskup noted, 'the considerable power in the hands of the settlers became authority'. Biskup reported the case of a 'Murchison pastoralist who sentenced one of his aboriginal workers to two months' hard labour with flogging'. (Biskup, 1973, p. 37).

The literature of the period made frequent references to acts of cruelty by whites against Aborigines. In 1885 Rev. John Brown Gribble, an Anglican missionary from Queensland, arrived in the North-West to set up a mission in the Gascoyne district. His experiences of the labour system and the ill-treatment of Aborigines at the hands of certain pastoralists and police lead him to denounce the entire situation to his superiors and in the press. Later, these reports, together with a statement, 'How native witnesses are treated' (1886) by David Carly, were published as *Dark deeds in a sunny land: or blacks and whites in North-West Australia* (1886).

Gribble's reports were particularly directed against the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by the white settlers of the North-West region. He stated:

But yet another reason for my defining the native labor system as a species of slavery is the sad fact of the assignment of native women and girls to white men, the great majority of whom are single.... On every station women and girls are engaged, principally as shepherds, and these creatures are entirely in the hands of the owners; I say owners, because certain settlers have told me that they owned all the natives on their respective runs. (Gribble, 1886, p. 35).

Gribble's report referred to facts 'so exceedingly repulsive in their character as to be unfit for the columns of a family newspaper'. He stated: 'Assignment of native females against their will for purposes of immorality is a sign of slavery'. (Gribble, 1886, p. 35).

Sexual abuse of Aboriginal women is a significant dimension in *Coonardoo*. In the novel, the white pastoralist most consistently associated with sexual exploitation of female Aborigines, is Sam Geary. Geary and his prototype, Brumby Innes, who appeared in Prichard's three-act play, *Brumby Innes*, are based on an historical person, a pastoral station owner, well-known in the North-West for cohabitation with Aboriginal women. The pastoralist, A. Leake of Prairie Downs Station, was known locally as 'Brumby' Leake. Prichard encountered Leake during her North-West visit and her letter of the 17 October 1926 from Turee Station to Vance and Nettie Palmer contained a postscript, stating,

I've done a play to be called 'The Brumby', or 'Brumby ---' somebody or other. The real thing is here. His name is Leake. It fits so - 'Brumby Leake'. And I've got to find one that won't run me in for libel. (Quoted in Throssell, 1974, p. xiv). (Further details of 'Brumby' Leake are contained in Appendix 1).

Although Aboriginal women are essentially powerless to withstand exploitation by Sam Geary, there is no overt coercion in relation to his concubinage of Aboriginal women in

the novel. The sexual coercion of Aboriginal women is a central theme in the play. Geary treats his Aboriginal concubines with generosity, at least whilst they are in favour, presenting them with silk dresses and even money. He provides them with 'corrugated-iron huts on Nuniewarra' and they remain on the station even when they are out of favour. (Prichard, 1929, p. 51). On the other hand, he is indifferent to the fate of his part-Aboriginal daughters who, apparently, are entirely at his disposal. The text states that: 'girls had been given to passing teamsters, or drovers'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 98).

Gribble noted the prevalence of Aboriginal women travelling with teamsters. He recorded:

Upon asking some of these men why they had girls and not boys attached to their teams, some said they 'preferred them'; others said they were 'better than boys', and that 'boys always run away', but others frankly admitted that they had them for immoral purposes. (Gribble, 1886, p. 35).

Prichard deals with this situation in *Coonardoo*, but the text does not demonstrate that the practice is in any way repugnant to Aboriginal women, or their menfolk. Bardi leaves with Don Drew's camel train of her own volition:

She had run after the camels and joined Don's camp, although Coonardoo shut her up one night in the bathroom at the homestead. Don had left a couple of blankets for Chitali, whose woman Bardi was, and Chitali seemed to prefer the blankets. (Prichard, 1929, p. 134).

Gribble's reports of atrocities against Aborigines caused a furore of disapproval and denial as well as physical and verbal attacks on him personally. Eventually, Gribble was forced to leave the colony.

The Colonial Secretary, in fact, took the allegations made by Rev. J.B. Gribble seriously. He requested information from the Roebourne police on the individual allegations made by both Gribble and Carly. Some of the allegations were dismissed as

either 'vastly exaggerated' or 'untrue' and in quite a few cases were not followed up because Carly had refused to name the person accused. (PROWA CSO ACC.388. Files 3657/86 to 3682/86).

Commenting on the 'Gribble Affair' as it became known, Paul Hasluck stated that, in all probability, Gribble's 'tactlessness and temper' was responsible for much of the abuse he received and that: 'The welfare of the natives was obscured in an all-round blackening of reputations'. (Hasluck, 1942, p. 165). Hasluck contends that there is ample evidence to suggest that Gribble could have made individual charges of ill-treatment and he could have challenged the prevailing relations between white master and black servant quite successfully if he had been more moderate.

In his 'Introduction' to *Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land*, Bob Tonkinson, stated: 'What is remarkable is that the whites did not risk the loss of respectability and social standing by their inhumane treatment or killing of Aborigines'. (Tonkinson, 1987, p. xv). This is a point also made by J.T. Reilly in 1903 who stated: 'In the past a very erroneous opinion has prevailed, to the effect that there was really no moral delinquency in shooting a native. Natives were regarded as exceedingly troublesome, and to clear them off the face of the earth was esteemed a work which brought no obloquy on those who engaged in it'. (Reilly, 1903, p. 375).

An appreciable number of North-Westerners described as leading members of European society in the region were involved in atrocities against Aborigines. John Withnell was implicated in the Flying Foam massacre of 1868, in which many Aborigines were killed. The exact toll is not known, stated Hasluck, 'the account of the numbers varying from the alarming figure of 150 quoted on one side and the conservative phrase "it is doubtful if more than ten were killed" on the other side'. (Hasluck, 1942, p. 189). Withnell was also a party to an act of violence against an Aboriginal woman, Talarong, which is described by Susan Hunt in *Spinifex and Hessian* (1986). In May 1891, Talarong, who

worked on a remote camp belonging to the Withnells, refused to care for the sheep placed in her charge. In fact, she stated that they could 'go to buggery'. 'Withnell, standing nearby with his horse, struck her hard with his bridle'. (Hunt, 1986, p. 99). Talarong armed with a stick rushed at him but he was able to stave off her attack with the stick belonging to another Aboriginal woman. In the ensuing affray, Talarong received severe injuries from which she died two days later. Withnell was absolved from blame due to the 'great provocation' he had received from Talarong. (Hunt, 1986, p. 101).

*Coonardoo* presents a similar act of violence by a station owner against an Aboriginal woman. Ted Watt is responsible for the death of Maria, Coonardoo's mother, who dies in similar circumstances to those surrounding the death of Talarong, cited above. Maria had 'refused to do something he [Ted] told her when he was drunk. He had kicked her off the veranda. Maria died a few days afterwards'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). No legal penalty results from Ted's action, but providence intervenes and a few months later he is killed when he walks over the balcony of an hotel and 'the blacks believed justice had been done'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8).

There is a chronological discrepancy in the text in respect of the deaths of Ted and Maria. Early in the novel a statement is made that: 'Ted Watt had died so long ago, before Hugh could speak. Soon after he was born indeed'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 3). But later in the text Geary asks if Coonardoo is the child of:

'Maria ... the one that died and there was all that fuss about, couple of years ago?' (Prichard, 1929, p. 5).

If the first reference, which dates the deaths of Maria and Ted in the babyhood of Hugh and Coonardoo, is intended, then the details of the incident would have remained hidden from them: the Aborigines never speak of the dead and Mrs. Bessie, 'held her tongue'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). If the later date is the relevant one, then Hugh and Coonardoo

would have been six and seven-years-old, respectively. In which case the text would need to accommodate the fact that Coonardoo is devoted to the son of the man who murdered her mother.

Of interest, is the difference in the portrayal of the incident in the *Bulletin* serial and in the novel. The serial version of Ted's attack on Maria reads: 'He had flung himself at her, and kicked her off the balcony. Mrs Bessie had tried to pull him away from the gin, and he had knocked her down too'. (Prichard, *Bulletin*, 5 September 1928, p. 55). The novel limits the attack on Maria to 'kicked her off the balcony' and makes no reference to intervention by Bessie Watt. Possibly, Prichard was aware that the more generalised violence in the *Bulletin* version of the incident contravened her attestation in the novel's 'Introduction' to the 'humanity' of the station owners on 'isolated stations of the Nor'-West'. It certainly calls into question the notion of the status of the Watt marriage as essentially successful and of Bessie's status as the driving force within it.

Allegations continued to be made that settlers were mistreating their Aboriginal workers and these charges were the subject of newspaper reports in Britain and the eastern colonies. Paul Hasluck expressed the opinion that: 'Many of the wilder and worse-founded charges gained currency in the other colonies and in England and attracted the reproofs and stern advice of many ill-informed sympathizers with the natives'. (Hasluck, 1942, p. 165). These press reports were, possibly, responsible for the provision in the 1889 Constitution Act, which granted self-government to Western Australia, that Britain would remain responsible for the Aborigines when Western Australia took control of its own affairs in October 1890.

The Imperial government's retention of Aboriginal affairs was an affront to the newly formed state government which resented the implication that it was inadequate or unwilling to care for its own indigenous population. The new government was further angered by the provisions of the Act which required it to finance the Aborigines

Protection Board at the rate of 1% of annual revenue or £5000 whichever was the greater, whilst control of the Board remained in the hands of the Governor. With the discovery of gold in Western Australia colonial revenue increased beyond all expectation. In 1897 1% of revenue meant that in that year nearly £30 000 (Hasluck, 1942, p. 203) was devoted to Aboriginal welfare. Following a visit to England by the Premier, John Forrest, the Aborigines Protection Board was abolished. The Aborigines Department came into existence on 1 April 1898. (Biskup, 1973, p. 25). Paul Hasluck summed up the situation, as follows:

With the settled ideas that the natives were dying out and were of inferior class, and without a single shred of idealism, the people of Western Australia received into their care the sacred charge of several thousands of human beings. The Imperial Government ended its rule of uncertainty, inconsistency and neglect and handed on a charge that was ill-kept, contaminated, hopeless and despised. (Hasluck, 1942, p. 203).

Peter Biskup estimated that at the end of the 19th century there were about 3500 Aborigines in the North-West who were 'more or less attached to white settlements'. (Biskup, 1973, p. 29).

In the early years of the 20th century allegations of exploitation and ill-treatment of Aborigines in the pastoral industry of the North-West continued to appear in the press of both the eastern states and Britain. Representative of these charges is a letter to the Editor published in the *London Times* of 8 April, 1904, in which a certain Walter Malcolmson claimed that:

After an experience of several years of the north-west district of Western Australia, I consider the Aborigines there are worse off than the negro was in American slave days. I have repeatedly seen the natives flogged with horsewhips and sticks by their 'masters' for trivial faults, and I have often seen 'indentured' servants in stations eating offal to satisfy their hunger. The police troopers are supplied with chains to drag back runaway servants....

Western Australia is the one slave state in the Commonwealth. The record of the 'indenture' system there is a black stain on British justice and a foul crime against suffering humanity.

I wish from my heart that the last Aboriginal of Western Australia was at rest. (*Times*, 8 April 1904).

The *Times* published extracts of a letter received from Daisy Bates in response to Malcolmson's allegations, in which she stated:

For Mr Malcolmson to describe indenturing as slavery... is ridiculous... there is no hope of the station owners ever growing into plaster saints, yet the majority of them are humane and will not wantonly ill-treat their natives. (*Times*, 24 May, 1904).

This is not, in fact, a complete repudiation of the charges made by Malcolmson. Later in the year Mrs Bates applied for a government post to 'record the customs and dialects of the Aboriginal population'. She commenced her appointment on 3rd May 1904 and was paid 8/- per day.

Prichard's text does nothing to discount Malcolmson's charges of slavery and ill-treatment by pastoralists in the North-West. Hugh defines the working relationship between management and Aboriginal workers on Wyaliba for the benefit of Mollie, who had believed the Aboriginal women were her servants. Hugh tells her:

'But these people are not servants ... not in the ordinary way. We don't pay them, except in food, tobacco, clothing.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 92).

Although monetary wages would be valueless to Hugh's Aboriginal station hands as they would have nowhere in the immediate vicinity to spend it, their overall welfare receives scant consideration on Wyaliba. Notably, the poor quality of their housing. The text states: 'Every hut in the uloo had water lying in it, and all round. The roofs were sieves through which the rain poured'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 76).

The Wyaliban Aborigines' lack of autonomy is revealed in the sketch that follows Hugh's aggressive attack on Coonardoo. The Aborigines resent Hugh's cruelty to her but: 'There was no thought of failing to do as Hugh had commanded'. (Prichard, 1929, p.



187).

Prichard presents a situation which comes very close to slavery but which is partially disguised by the representation of Aboriginal fear of the spirit world. The breach in the relationship between Hugh and the Aborigines which would logically have followed Hugh's treatment of Coonardoo is obviated by the Aborigines' belief that Hugh's actions are beyond his control. The Aborigines stay away from Hugh: 'As though he were an evil spirit, possessed by a narlu'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 187). The Aborigines' only defiance is to sulk and avert their gaze. Earlier in the text the statement is made that the Aboriginal station hands 'knew Youie too well to disobey' him. (Prichard, 1929, p. 123).

The West Australian government could hardly ignore the continual charges of slavery within its borders. Particularly as it was 'claiming to subscribe to liberal ideals'. (Biskup, 1973, p. 59). In April 1904 initial approaches had been made to Dr Roth, 'Assistant Protector of Aborigines for Queensland, an Oxford-educated surgeon and ethnologist of repute', requesting him to make a survey of Aboriginal administration. On 31 August, 1904, he was formally appointed Royal Commissioner. (Biskup, 1973, p. 59).

In 1905 the Royal Commission on the Condition of the Natives, known as the Roth Commission, published its Report and Recommendations with respect to the employment conditions of Aboriginal workers.

The Roth report received the full support of the *Morning Herald* and the *Daily News* and the majority of churches. It was criticised by the *West Australian* for its failure to suggest an effective policy for future guidance. The Anglican church remained cautiously neutral with Bishop Riley claiming the 'whole of Dr Roth's time has been more or less wasted'. (Biskup, 1973, pp. 59-60).

John Forrest who had refused to institute enquiries into the treatment of Aborigines in Western Australia was quick to discredit the findings of the Roth Royal Commission particularly those indicting the prevailing conditions of employment of Aborigines in the pastoral industry. That Forrest was not a disinterested party is revealed by C. T. Stannage in *The people of Perth: a social history of Western Australia's capital city* (1979), which stated: 'John Forrest's wealth derived from his wife's inheritance and pastoral concerns on the Ashburton and Murchison Rivers'. (Stannage, 1979, p. 222).

Following on from the Roth Report, the *Aborigines Act, 1905* (WA) came into force. The preamble to the Act stated that its purpose was 'the better protection and care of the Aboriginal inhabitants of Western Australia'.

The Act dealt directly with the employment of Aborigines. It retained contracts and required employers to provide their workers with rations, clothing, blankets, medicine and medical attention but did not specifically provide for the payment of cash wages. It prohibited the engagement of children under sixteen and abolished indentures of apprenticeship.

The Act provided for the setting up of reserves, not exceeding 2000 acres, to which unemployed Aborigines could be removed and restricted. The legislation permitted the police to arrest, without warrant, any Aborigines who offended against the provisions of the Act. Biskup comments that the Act was a formal acknowledgement by the government that it had abandoned any attempt to bring the 'blessings of civilisation' to the Aborigines but aimed, instead, at the ruthless control of both full-bloods and part-Aborigines. But even so, Biskup stated: 'In the pastoral north, for all its manifest shortcomings, the act was a step in the right direction'. (Biskup, 1973, p. 65).

The Act made the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by white men a punishable offence.

**Section 42 stipulated:**

**No marriage of a female aboriginal with any person other than an aboriginal shall be celebrated without the permission, in writing, of the Chief Protector. (*Aborigines Act, 1905* (WA), s. 42).**

**Section 43 stated:**

**Every person other than an aboriginal who habitually lives with aborigines, and every male person other than an aboriginal who cohabits with any female aboriginal, not being his wife, shall be guilty of an offence against this Act.**

**Every male person, not being an aboriginal, who travels accompanied by a female aboriginal, shall be presumed, in the absence of proof to the contrary, to be cohabiting with her, and it shall be presumed, in the absence of proof to the contrary, that she is not his wife. (*Aborigines Act, 1905* (WA), s. 43).**

**Penalties were set out in Section 58 of the Act, which specified:**

**Every person convicted of an offence against this Act shall, except as is herein otherwise provided, be liable to imprisonment, with or without hard labour, for not exceeding six months, or to a fine not exceeding fifty pounds. (*Aborigines Act, 1905* (WA), s. 58).**

*Coonardoo* makes no allusion to the illegality of Hugh's cohabitation with Coonardoo which commenced in about 1913. The relationship remains unconsummated but this would not have constituted a legal defence as cohabitation was prohibited by Section 43 of the *Aborigines Act, 1905*.

The novel's message in regard to interracial sexual relationships is not unambiguously presented. Such liaisons are, seemingly, condemned in the novel (and by Prichard elsewhere, see Irwin, 1956, p.31), but at the same time the text demonstrates that such sexual relationships are not only desired by both parties but are also essential to their well-being.

Coonardoo is defeated by the sterility of her relationship with Hugh. His continued sexual repudiation of her is shown to be entirely contrary to her wishes. She 'could not imagine why Hugh did not take her as his woman... sullen anger grew in Coonardoo's eyes because of it'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 140). She is still waiting for Hugh, 'half dead in her sterility', when she is seduced by Geary. Coonardoo's sexual need has become so great that she succumbs to the man 'whom she had loathed and feared beyond any human being. Yet male to her female, she could not resist him. Her need of him was as great as the dry earth's for rain'. (Prichard, 1929, pp. 179-180).

Hugh's celibacy in relation to Coonardoo is represented as due to his 'cussedness' which 'deterred him from doing what everybody expected him to'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 140). A consequence of his 'swag of ideals'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 44). But Hugh is also acting contrary to his needs and desires. He believes that:

here in a country of endless horizons, limitless sky shells, to live within yourself was to decompose internally. You had to keep in the life flow of the country to survive.... After all what was this impulse of man to woman, woman to man, but the law of growth moving within them. How could a man stand still, sterilize himself in a land where drought and sterility were hell? ... No wonder the blacks worshipped life, growth - sex - as the life source. (Prichard, 1929, p. 109).

Even though he holds such a view, Hugh ignores the potency of Coonardoo's own sexual needs and punishes her, cruelly, when he learns she has succumbed to Geary.

In *Coonardoo* acts of cruelty are committed with impunity by the male owners of Prichard's fictional cattle station against Aboriginal women. Already mentioned is the death of Coonardoo's mother, Maria, after she is beaten by Ted Watt. (Prichard, 1929, p. 8). There is an oblique reference to Hugh's brutality towards Aboriginal women in the description of his differential treatment of white and Aboriginal women. The text acknowledges that Hugh might shake Mollie or threaten to strangle her: 'But a stick, or a

boot, he would only use on a gin'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 119). Finally, there is Hugh's assault on Coonardoo when he learns she has had sexual relations with Geary:

He dashed her away in his fury... bashed Coonardoo across the face... struggled with her.... To escape her desperate grasp he dragged her across the fire.... Hugh twisted her wrist back, thrusting her away from him. Coonardoo fell back into the fire. (Prichard, 1929, p. 186).

Following the attack, Hugh is indifferent to the suffering he has caused Coonardoo. He must have been aware of her wretched physical condition: 'All night she lay moaning'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 187). He makes no provision for her medical treatment and does not attempt to rescind her banishment once his anger has abated. Although he admits he would not have treated a dog so badly, he still does not say to the Aborigines: 'Bring her back. See that you bring her back, boys, no matter where she is, what she's done.' (Prichard, 1929, p.192). Neither does he anticipate or receive any legal penalty for his action.

Prichard's statement that on pastoral stations in the North-West, Aborigines 'are treated with consideration and kindness' (Prichard, 1929, p. v), is contradicted by the abuse of Aboriginal women presented in her text. Her statement is certainly contradicted by historical data.

Susan Hunt refers to the almost universal sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women in the pastoral industry. Many Aboriginal women were placed under contracts of employment which bound them to the station owner or his manager. Many were signed against their will for sexual services. (Hunt, 1986, p. 106). Hunt records the case of Caroline, a young Aboriginal woman at Byro Station in 1898. Caroline was forced to sign a contract to work for the pastoralist Walter Nairn. The contract, which included sexual services, had been witnessed by his brother, William Nairn, J.P. Caroline had three children by Walter Nairn and had been forbidden to mix with other Aboriginal

people. Caroline was 25 years old but she earnestly wished 'she were an old woman... so that she could bush walk and no-one would want to fetch her back'. (Hunt, 1986, p. 106).

Similarly, Coonardoo is at the disposal of her white employer on the death of Warieda. The textual excuse is that Hugh saves her from becoming Geary's woman. But even so, she is not consulted but simply transferred from the Aboriginal camp. Hugh tells her:

'You will be my woman, now, Coonardoo,' Hugh said. 'Sleep in the room at the end of the veranda.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 139).

In Prichard's text there is never any doubt that Coonardoo is sexually available to Hugh. The fact that he abstains from sexual intimacy with her is his decision alone. 'Hugh's hunger was in his eyes when he looked at her ... and yet he would not touch her'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 140). A similar situation was reported by a Police Trooper of the North-West mounted police, E. Morrow, in *The law provides* (1937). Early in the 1920s, Morrow had interviewed a young man on an isolated station in northern Western Australia who spoke of his struggle to keep his self-respect by abstaining from sexual liaisons with Aboriginal women. The young man stated that:

Frequently... he rode miles out of his way to avoid a native camp where dwelt young native women. Company and a certain satisfaction were there for his taking, but so far he had valued his pride and manhood more. (Morrow, 1937, p. 94).

The young man obviously did not consider it necessary to consult the wishes of either the Aboriginal women or their menfolk. Ann McGrath, in her article, 'Spinifex fairies: Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory, 1911-39' (1980), noted that in traditional Aboriginal society 'wife lending' was allowed under certain conditions: the permission of the husband had to be obtained and suitable payment received. McGrath stated:

But in the colonial context the black man had virtually lost his bargaining

powers and the colonizer assumed almost total control, so the interaction between white man and black woman was one marked by compulsion. (McGrath, 1980, p. 249).

Morrow's young man found Aboriginal women both 'irresistibly alluring' and available.

Prichard's portrayal of Coonardoo as a romantic figure is not as unrealistic as is implied by one of the judges of the *Bulletin's* £500 prize novel competition, Cecil Mann, who stated:

With any other native, from fragrant Zulu girl to fly-kissed Arab maid, she could have done it. But the aboriginal, in Australia, anyway cannot excite any higher feeling than nauseated pity or comical contempt. (Quoted in Throssell, 1975, p. 54).

Ann McGrath, noted that: 'The law against cohabitation with black women was extremely difficult to enforce' and that 'Aboriginal women were considered the ideal in exploitable human flesh'. (McGrath, 1980, p. 250). She reported the incident in which:

One manager had induced a white man to enter his employ by offering him the pick of the best 'black velvet', informing him and other employees that there were plenty more down in the camp if they wanted them. (McGrath, 1980, p. 251).

Myrna Tonkinson in 'Sisterhood or Aboriginal servitude? Black women and white women on the Australian frontier' (1988), reveals that a degree of social control was exercised by white society through the attitudes it maintained towards sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women. Social approval was inversely proportional to the duration and stability of the relationships entered into.

Tonkinson reported that, in the view of white society, the most acceptable relationship was 'prostitution'; the taking of 'black velvet'. In many cases the 'white man simply exercised his *droit de seigneur* with women in his employ'. (Tonkinson, 1988, p. 30).

In the novel such casual sexual encounters do not receive any great disapprobation. When Billy Gale admits to Phyllis: 'I'm not shook on gins myself.... Not that I've been any better than most men who've lived a long time in this country, Phyll.' She merely 'smiled into his glittering faun's eyes. She imagined he was relieved to have got so much off his chest'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 171). For Gale, sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women are, 'as a rule', no more than 'accidental' and he expresses the view: 'A man doesn't love a gin, not a white man.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 198).

Tonkinson recorded that a less acceptable form of relationship was concubinage: in which a white man lived with an Aboriginal woman and the offspring of their union. But here the man would face the contempt of white society being known as a 'Combo', or in Prichard's description of the fictional Sam Geary, 'a gin shepherd'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 30).

White society's disapproval of the concubinage of Aboriginal women to white men is conveyed in the novel by the behaviour of Bessie Watt on her journey from the coast to Wyaliba:

Although she passed within a few miles of Nuniewarra homestead, Mrs Bessie would not call in there.... she would not meet a gin as mistress of a white man's household, or spend a night under Sam Geary's roof, if she could help it. (Prichard, 1929, p. 30).

Textual disgust of concubinage is made explicit in the words of Hugh Watt:

'I'm going to marry white and stick white.' Hugh said...

'No stud gins for mine - no matter what happens,' he swore to himself. (Prichard, 1929, p. 46).

D.R. Burns in *Directions of Australian fiction 1920-1974* (1975), noted that Hugh 'is sensibly and puritanically aware of the slovenliness associated with such arrangements'.



(Burns, 1975, p. 18).

Almost unheard of was the presence on a pastoral property of a white woman and an Aboriginal concubine. In Prichard's text social disapproval of such situations is made explicit in relation to Phyllis's residence on the station whilst Coonardoo is installed at the homestead: 'There was scarcely a white man in the district who did not disapprove of Hugh Watt's having his daughter on Wyaliba'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 171). The presence on Wyaliba of Coonardoo and her son by Hugh facilitates Mollie's escape from the arduous life on Wyaliba without incurring the reproof of white society. 'Hugh had taken a gin, it was said, and Mrs Hugh refused to live on the place with her and her children'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 135).

The rejection and banishment of Coonardoo from Hugh and the cattle station was a fictional reflection of the fate of many Aboriginal women in the historical situation. Almost inevitably the Aboriginal concubine was discarded by the white man either because he left the district or because he desired a more regular marital union with a white woman.

Myrna Tonkinson stated:

There are numerous instances of Aboriginal women assisting white men to establish stations while cohabiting with them, then, when the place was fit for a White woman, the man marrying one and installing her in the homestead. (Tonkinson, 1988, p. 34).

Involved in the situation quoted above, is the complex question of inheritance and legitimacy. This is a theme which is addressed in *Coonardoo*. Hodge and Mishra summarise the text's position:

In the scheme of the novel, marriage is the signifier of political and economic union, conferring legitimacy on the transfer of property to the next generation. (Hodge & Mishra, 1990, p. 55).

In the text inheritance is circumscribed by notions of legitimacy which are consistent with attitudes prevailing in Prichard's contemporary society in respect of both marriage and miscegenation. In the case of Wyaliba, Hugh's son by Coonardoo is excluded from inheritance by reason of his illegitimate birth (that is, in the eyes of white society) and because he is part-Aboriginal. Phyllis is excluded from direct inheritance by reason of her non-male status but not by illegitimacy of birth or miscegenation and she ultimately inherits through her husband, Billy Gale, who is Geary's heir in respect of both Nuniewarra and Wyaliba.

In the case of Nuniewarra, the part-Aboriginal progeny of Geary are not so much excluded from inheritance as never considered at all. Billy Gale states: 'Sam's getting on and he's got no one belonging to him, except Sheba, Tamar, and the rest of them and their kids' (Prichard, 1929, p. 169).

Hodge and Mishra's statement that the meaning of Prichard's novel is: 'only the union of Black and White is worthy to inherit the land', is not easily sustained. In every case, Prichard shows half-caste offspring being rejected by property owners. This attitude is made quite explicit in the play, *Brumby Innes*, when Brumby tells May:

'But I want youngsters. And a good home. You can make it what you like. Now the station's grown, there's the question who's to get it when I'm gone. I want youngsters, and I want'm thoroughbred.' (Prichard, 1940, p. 98).

Tonkinson noted that in the historical situation, marriage was the least acceptable form of relationship between a white man and an Aboriginal woman. Such marriages inevitably lead to the rejection of the husband by white society; at best he would be accepted but his wife was almost certainly excluded from any social interaction. Such marriages were regarded as cutting all ties with white society and particularly with white women and the man's 'degradation was irrevocable'. (Tonkinson, 1988, p. 31).

Prichard was aware that any kind of permanent relationship between a white man and an Aboriginal woman was unrealistic, given the prevailing social conditions in the period of the novel, 1866-1926. In her essay, 'Some perceptions and aspirations' (1968), Prichard emphasised that she 'could not falsify reality' when constructing her fictional texts. (Prichard, 1968, p. 239). She stated that the historical conditions did not justify the creation of an Australian communist hero in her goldfields trilogy. The same constraints applied to the portrayal of a viable marriage relationship between a white man and an Aboriginal woman in the text of *Coonardoo* which would have been contrary to the historical situation.

The sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women was part of the colonial process. Susan Hunt noted: 'It was an aspect of the wider European pastoral expansion and part of the exploitation and dispossession of Aboriginal people'. (Hunt, 1986, p. 112).

Dispossession and displacement from their ancestral homelands had consequences for the Aborigines beyond the destruction of their traditional economy. It meant also the disruption of their social patterns and separation from the foundation of their spiritual and ritual life. Neither Prichard nor the European settlers in the North-West were aware of the cosmic significance of Aboriginal rituals and ceremonies and their place in the maintenance of the physical and spiritual world inhabited by the Aborigines. Aboriginal traditional social and cultural forms, both as they are represented in *Coonardoo* and as they occurred in the wider historical context, are explored in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **ABORIGINAL SOCIETY**

In this chapter I wish to highlight and discuss the Aboriginal dimension in *Coonardoo* in terms of the author's representation of Aboriginal traditional socio-cultural and religious forms.

The overall purpose of this thesis is to read the text of *Coonardoo* back into the historical situation. The task of this chapter is to 'recover' the world of the Aborigines in the pre-settlement period. The text provides an entrance into the world of the first Australians and serves as a framework for understanding the social, religious and cultural patterns of that world. These traditional practices are explored both as they are depicted by Prichard in the novel and in light of subsequent ethnographic studies of Aboriginal traditions.

Prichard stated that the Aboriginal inclusions in her text were based on her own personal observations of these forms in operation in Aboriginal society. This claim is assessed in relation to the contemporary Aboriginal cultural and religious activities taking place in the region at the time of the author's field trip to the North-West. Discussion centres on the author's possible motives for making this claim with particular reference to the social mores and evolutionary beliefs existing in her contemporary society.

Possible sources for the Aboriginal dimension in the novel are investigated with particular attention being given to the works of anthropologists and ethnographers available to Prichard when she was writing her novel.

A significant theme of this chapter is the social situation and status of Aboriginal

women both as conveyed in the text of *Coonardoo* and as manifested in the wider historical context. This subject is discussed in relation to the religious and economic significance of Aboriginal women in the pre-colonial period and subsequently. Also under review in this chapter is the widely held belief that Aboriginal women lacked sexual autonomy in traditional society and this is shown to be a complex situation with social and religious implications.

Brief reference is made to the 'real' life situation of the Aborigines who resided on Turee Station during Prichard's visit and some details of their living and working conditions and their history is presented here.

It is almost certain that Prichard had no direct experience of Aborigines or their culture prior to her visit to the North-West. This is revealed in her letter from Turee Station to Vance and Nettie Palmer dated 17 October 1926, in which she stated:

And the blacks are most interesting - fair haired - and I find them poetic and naive. Quite unlike all I've ever been told, or asked to believe about them. (Throssell, 1975, p. 49).

The temper of Prichard's previous 'beliefs' about the Aborigines may be gauged from a passage in her early fiction written when the author was 23-years-old. The serial 'A city girl in Central Australia: her ups and downs at the "Back o' Beyond"' (1906), includes the following description of Aboriginal life:

Their filthy, reeking camps are always infested with hordes of starving mongrel dogs. They had a mysterious ceremony of 'rain-making'; covered themselves with dirt, and ran about cutting their bodies, waving their arms, yelling and moaning a monotonous chant. The lubras were ill-used, and beaten; the piccaninnies as often as not destroyed. (Prichard, *New Idea*, 6 July 1906, p. 48).

Twenty years later, Prichard set out for the North-West with a view to gathering material for her short story, 'The cooboo' (1927). Details of her journey and intentions are

described in Louis Esson's letter to Vance Palmer dated 29 September 1926. Esson referred to Prichard's visit to the North-West:

She has just gone off into the interior where she will get wonderful material, just the very thing she wants. She goes to the end of the railway, and then 400 miles to McGuire's station that is somewhere in the centre of Western Australia. It's five days journey. The station is run by blacks, and I'm sure she will get a fine book out of it. The blacks are so interesting that even Mrs. Gunn's mild and inadequate account of them has a certain fascination. But Kattie will do them very differently, and she's certain to give the spirit of that strange weird country as it has never been done before. (Palmer, 1948, p. 77).

When *Coonardoo* appeared in novel form in 1929, Prichard included an 'Introduction' which she titled 'Foreword to First Edition'. In this 'Introduction', Prichard stated that her field trip to the North-West had, indeed, provided all the material she needed for the novel. She claimed: 'Facts, characters, incidents, have been collected, related and interwoven. That is all'. (Prichard, 1929, p. v). She stated that this material had been authenticated by an expert in Aboriginal culture:

Before *Coonardoo* was printed in the *Bulletin* I asked Mr Ernest Mitchell to read the MS. Mr Mitchell is Chief Inspector of Aborigines for Western Australia. He has had thirty years' experience of the aborigines and no one in this country has wider knowledge and more sympathetic understanding of the Western and Nor'-West tribes. Mr Mitchell suggested an omission and several changes of spelling, but said that he could not fault the drawing of aborigines and conditions, in *Coonardoo*, as he knew them. (Prichard, 1929, p. v).

With respect to the expertise and the extent of Ernest Mitchell's contact with Aboriginal society this is rather more limited than Prichard stated. Pat Jacobs, in *Mister Neville: a biography* (1990), recorded that Mitchell's official status was 'travelling Inspector of the North' (Jacobs, 1990, p. 117) and not Chief Protector of Aborigines. Jacobs noted that his appointment extended from about 1916 until he was 'retrenched' in 1930. (Jacobs, 1990, p.186). Jacobs made a number of references implying Mitchell over-assessed his knowledge of Aborigines. She described him as, 'E.C. Mitchell, that fount of inside

information on Aboriginal Affairs. (Jacobs, 1990, p. 134). She stated: 'He had a well-developed sense of his superior ability to oversee the welfare of Aborigines'. (Jacobs, 1990, pp. 186-187).

Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, in *Dark side of the dream: Australian literature and the postcolonial mind* (1990), also had reservations both in regard to Prichard's claim of direct experience of Aboriginal traditions and the appropriateness of using Mitchell to authenticate her material. Hodge and Mishra stated:

In her preface to the book she emphasised the factual basis of the novel, its grounding in first-hand knowledge and research in the field. But surprisingly her preface appeals to the authority of no less than Ernest Mitchell... A version which could not be faulted by such a source must be extremely devious, or else complicit with the dominant regime. (Hodge & Mishra, 1990, p. 54).

Throughout her life, Prichard continued to assert that her Aboriginal inclusions in the novel were based on her own observations. In an interview in 1967 with Tony Thomas she re-affirmed her belief in the expertise of Ernest Mitchell, stating: 'I did have valuable contact with Ernest Mitchell, who had been protector of Aborigines, and knew several dialects. I consulted him about many facets of Aboriginal lore.' (Thomas, 1967, p. 55). But, significantly, when asked: 'Would it have mattered if she had got a lot of the lore wrong'? She replied:

'There has been some controversy whether any white man living among black women could have been celibate to the extent that Hugh was in the novel. But the situation was quite feasible.' (Thomas, 1967, p. 55).

A response which is a *non sequitur*: black-white sexual liaisons could not be construed as Aboriginal 'lore'. The evasion of the subject is a frequent characteristic of Prichard's statements. In this respect she resembled her own character, Mollie: 'She often spoke like that quite irrelevantly and off the subject, in a way which made you hopeless of reaching her mind, combating what she had said'. (Prichard, 1929, pp. 104-105).

In respect of Prichard's 'Introduction' to *Coonardoo*, Gail Jones in her doctoral thesis, *Mimesis and alterity: postcolonialism, ethnography and the representation of racial 'otherness'* (1994), makes a number of observations which have relevance to the discussion presented here. Jones expressed the view that the 'Introduction' is constructed as an 'authorial attestation' in which Prichard makes a specific claim for the scientific/ethnographic status of her text. It is not a work constructed from 'romantic imagination' but is founded on the dispassionate observations of the 'natural scientist'. Jones noted that when Prichard asserted her work was based on direct experience she was thereby making an unassailable claim that it is 'somehow actual and veridical'. (Jones, 1994, p. 64).

Gail Jones noted that ethnography's essential purpose is the discovery of the essence of the culture it scrutinises and the textual preservation of that essence; which is already in the process of disappearing. These two elements are combined in Prichard's 'Introduction' in the passage:

People who see the blacks only along the transcontinental line, or when they have become poor, degraded and degenerate creatures, as a result of contact with towns and the vices of white people, cannot understand how different they are in their natural state, or on isolated stations of the Nor'-West. (Prichard, 1929, p. v).

Thus in one sentence Prichard affirmed her cognition of the essence, 'natural state', of the Aborigines and at the same time she confirmed the transience, 'degenerate creatures', of her subjects. In the 'Introduction' Prichard is claiming that her text both guarantees and preserves the culture she scrutinised. Jones stated: 'It is a position of moral authority: there is moral capital in being the agent of such culturally commiserating recuperation'. (Jones, 1994, p. 65).

Prichard's 'Introduction' emphasised the conservationist nature of her text in face of the



inevitable extinction of the Aborigines, who, like the fossil men of Europe, would inevitably disappear. She noted the many aspects of the moribund nature of Aboriginal culture. The meanings of myths and legends performed in corroborees were already lost and were written in a language the Aborigines could no longer understand. Aboriginal poetic language had been invaded by 'the adoption and growth of white man's words in the native idiom'. (Prichard, 1929, p. vi). The Introduction infers that the power of conservation is beyond the grasp of the Aborigines and, thus becomes the responsibility of the white colonisers who alone can be trusted to interpret and preserve these remaining cultural fragments.

Even so, Prichard's metamorphosis from 'romantic' writer to ethnographer is surprising given the author's desire for acceptance by the Australian literary establishment. But it can, perhaps, be understood as a response to the furore which greeted *Coonardoo* when it appeared in serial form in the *Bulletin* in 1928. The Editor, S.H. Prior, stated: 'our disastrous experience with *Coonardoo* shows us that the Australian public will not stand stories based on a white man's relations with an Australian aborigine'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 55). Prichard, herself, referred to this public disapproval of *Coonardoo*: 'Prior kept sending me ridiculous letters from anonymous correspondents'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 55).

Thus it is possible that Prichard's 'Introduction' was an attempt to rehabilitate her text in the eyes of the reading public by transferring it from the artistic to the scientific realm. But, as will be discussed, the text does not accord very well with ethnographic data in respect of the historical situation of the Aborigines in the North-West region at the time of Prichard's visit to Turee Station.

By 1926 the pastoral industry had already been established in the North-West for approximately 60 years and traditional Aboriginal culture in the region had largely disappeared. All that remained was a modification and adaptation of the original customs and practices. This is the substance of R.M. Berndt's essay, 'Traditional

Aboriginal life in Western Australia: as it was and is' (1979), in which he described the gradual dissolution and re-integration of Aboriginal socio-cultural patterns which took place throughout the settlement period.

Berndt looked back to the early days when Aborigines were closely tied to specific stretches of country. This territory, the homeland, was the basis of the groups' economic and spiritual life. Social interaction and communication was restricted to the people within the territory who shared the same language, or dialect, and the same domestic and religious patterns.

Colonial development not only displaced the people from their homelands with its hunting grounds and sacred sites but forced them to integrate with other Aboriginal groups whose language and customs were different from their own. Gradually, the various displaced groups were incorporated into a new cultural pattern centred on the resettlement area. On a few pastoral stations where the original group remained, their traditional cultural forms still existed but were severely curtailed by the groups' lack of autonomy in respect of freedom of movement within the station boundaries and the group 'had little opportunity for independent action'. (Berndt, 1979, p. 4).

Very little information is available in regard to the pre-contact traditional groups in the region of Turee Station. A single paragraph in a letter dated 23 May 1995 received from Diana MacCallum, the Heritage Officer of the Aboriginal Affairs Department stated: 'As far as I know, the Yinhawangka (Inawongga) and Ngarla (Ngarlawongga) socio-linguistic groups traditionally occupied the Turee Creek area'. (see Appendix 2).

Boundaries of the homelands of the original groups of the North-West are shown on a number of maps of varying reliability. The map presented here is included in *Western Australia: an atlas of human endeavour 1829-1979* (1979). (Jarvis, 1979, p. 32). The map shows the boundaries of the traditional socio-linguistic groups mentioned by the

Aboriginal Affairs Department, 'Inawongga' and 'Ngalawongga'; Prichard's text refers to the station Aborigines as 'Gnarler'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 10). The map is reproduced by permission of the Department of Land Administration:



A very brief reference is made by Norman Tindale in *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: their terrain, environmental controls, distribution, limits, and proper names* (1974) to the Inawongga and Ngarlawongga. The section titled 'Catalog of Australian Aborigines tribes, Western Australia', gives the following particulars:

**Inawongga.**

**Loc.** On Hardey River south of Rocklea, south-east along upper Ashburton from Turee Creek upstream to Kunderong Range and Angelo River; south only a short distance from the main Ashburton River channel to the north of Mount Vernon Station. Enmity with the Ngarlawongga prevented them from visiting Tunnel Creek.

**Coord:** 117° 45'E x 23° 25'S

**Area:** 3,600 sq. m. (9,400 sq. km).

**Alt.** Inawangga, Inawonga (in error)  
(Tindale, 1974, p. 241).

**Ngarlawongga.**

**Loc.** Headwaters of the Ashburton and Gascoyne Rivers; south to near Three Rivers and Mulgul; east to Ilgarari.

**Coord:** 118° 55'E x 20' S [sic].

**Area** 8,700 sq. m. (22,600 sq km).

**Alt.** Ngalwongga, Nalawonga, Ngarla-warngga, 'Southern Pad'ima', Ngalawonga, Ngarla (not to be confused with de Grey River tribe of that name).  
(Tindale, 1974, p. 252).

It has been possible to obtain first-hand information regarding the early history of Turee Station from Dr. Richard J. Maguire, son of the original owner of the station. Dr Maguire recalls that, as a seven-year-old, he had been present on Turee Station during Prichard's visit there. A record of a telephone interview with Dr. Maguire is included in Appendix 1.

Dr Maguire stated that the Aborigines camped on Turee Station in 1926 did not constitute anything like a 'tribe'; although they were of the same 'pattern' as Aborigines within a radius of about fifty miles of the station.

The Turee Station Aborigines had arrived on the station with the original owners Piesse

and Maguire. Maguire had acquired his herd of cattle over a number of years, commencing in the early days of the century and had gradually moved into the area, travelling along the Ashburton River and Turee Creek. In his transmission along the waterways, various Aboriginal groups camped in the vicinity had joined him and together they had moved into the unoccupied lands which eventually constituted Turee Station.

At the time of Prichard's arrival, about 50 or 60 Aborigines were living at the Aboriginal camp - this number included children. None of the Aboriginal people had been born on the station although some of the children and young teenagers who came with the original groups might claim some kind of relationship with the station, stated Dr. Maguire.

Information about Aboriginal customs, but of a limited nature, may have been available to Prichard in 1926. Ric Throssell recollected that as a four-year-old he had observed Prichard gathering material on the station:

For hours, day after day, it seemed to an aggrieved small son, she sat at the edge of the station veranda talking to the shy aboriginal girl who helped in the homestead kitchen; rode with her sometimes to the dry creek-bed near the aborigines' camp. (Throssell, 1975, p, 49).

The 'dry creek-bed near the aborigines' camp' was, possibly, as close as Prichard came to viewing Aboriginal camp life at Turee Station. Ric Throssell recalled that whilst on Turee Station, Prichard acquired her material from within the confines of the homestead:

From the yarns of the men round the fire in the long kitchen on cold nights, or stretched out on the veranda after the heat and glare of the day, she learnt the folklore of the north-west, the tragedy and comedy of everyday life. (Throssell, 1975, p. 48).

At the time of her visit, Prichard seems to have shown as much interest in the activities

of the white pastoralists at the homestead as in the customs of the Aborigines in their employ. In her letter to Hilda Esson of 1 November, 1926, towards the end of her visit, she wrote: 'And next week I'm going on a ten days muster with men of the place, no other female, except perhaps a gin'. (Throssell, 1975, p. 50)

In his autobiography, *My father's son* (1989), Ric Throssell recalls that Prichard was unable to attend the ten-day muster whilst at Turee Station due to his having contracted trachoma; she remained at the station homestead to nurse him. (Throssell, 1989, p. 96). In the novel Phyllis misses a cattle-muster when she has an 'attack of blight' (trachoma). (Prichard, 1929, p. 173).

Prichard intended no insult to Aboriginal women when she used the term 'gin'. In the period in which she wrote the usual terms for Aboriginal men and women were 'man' and 'gin', respectively. Even so, it was a marker of the 'otherness' with which Prichard regarded the Aborigines. Prichard never doubted her superiority of race in regard to the Aborigines in terms of evolution. In the 'Introduction' to the novel she re-iterated Herbert Basedow's statement: 'In other words, the Australian aboriginal stands somewhere near the bottom rung of the great evolutionary ladder we have ascended'. (Basedow, 1925, p. 58; Prichard, 1929, pp. v-vi). This view finds expression in the novel in such descriptive passages as the following, which attributes Warieda's horsebreaking skill to an affinity between the Aborigine and the animal world:

Warieda went up to the horse, his arm, the dark sinewy arm of a black that was like the branch of a tree, stretched out before him... His hand going straight to brain communicated the spell of the man, in language of the flesh, an old forgotten flow of instincts. Warieda was nearer to the horse than any of the white men about him. Handsome, aboriginal as he was, that was perhaps the secret of his power. (Prichard, 1929, p. 48).

The files of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, formerly the Department of Native affairs, contain very little archival material from Turee Station. The earliest records are



contained in two files, which are available under 'Restricted' access. That is to say, before a file is opened, permission has to be obtained from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, who ensure that any material of a sensitive nature has been removed from the file before releasing it.

Department of Aboriginal Affairs's file: PROWA. DAA. ACC.2819. File 38.209. 1951-1968, includes details of Aboriginal welfare, wages, housing, etc. on Turee Station for the years 1951 to 1968. This is rather in advance of the period under consideration but it does reveal something of living conditions for Aboriginal workers and their families on the station. The standard of amenities in this later period can, at best, reflect those obtaining in earlier years. For example, the Inspector's Report dated 13th July, 1956 described Aboriginal housing:

Accommodation: Three local timber and corrugated iron huts and one timber sided tarpaulin hut are provided. These are crude dwellings and the natives have complained that they do not keep out rain. (PROWA. DAA. ACC. 2819. File 38.209.1951-1968).

The Inspector's Report dated 28th February, 1958. recorded that: 'No sanitation is provide for natives - they go bush'. (PROWA. DAA. ACC. 2819. File 38.209. 1951-1968).

The earliest Inspector's Report to the Department of Native Affairs is undated, but other archival evidence suggests it was compiled about 1953. Extracts from this report provide details of Aborigines and camp life on the station:

Natives: Brumby Bill @ Bingamara (approx. 55). His wife is Big Kubu (approx. 35). This couple together work stock, Bill being paid 30/- a week and his tribal wife 15/- a week. Both get full keep, including tobacco and clothes, as do all natives on this station.

Bardi (no English name) is approx. 35. He receives 25/- a week. His wife Topsy also works as a musterer and is aged 60 years. She receives 15/- a week. Topsy's aboriginal name is Kundri.



Paddy @ Jambu (approx. 60) is known mostly as Turee Paddy. He receives 25/- a week and Maggie, his 60 year old wife lives at the homestead where she does not work. She is not paid.

Dinni (17) has no English name. He is the son of Kubu and his father was Tumbler (deceased). Dinni is single and is paid 25/- a week.

Billie @ Manubonng and tribal wife Tessie @ Kadadu are aged indigents. Billie is blind. They are fed and clothed.

Bessie is Brumby Bill's mother and aged more than 70. She does not work but is fed and clothed at the station.

Bidgie is a native woman, aged about 50. She has no tribal husband and does not work. She is however a tribal relative of some of the employees at the station, and is allowed to live at Turee, being fed and clothed.

Quarters: Iron and timber have been supplied to the natives at this station and they have themselves built weather-proof huts. They are unlined, the roof height is low, being about 6 or 7 feet, the floors are of earth. The manager, Mr. Jones, was understanding and co-operative when it was suggested to him that quarters could be of a better type. It was obvious however that he genuinely believed that the natives preferred the humpies in which they were living. He said that the humpies previously had been quarters, but that the natives had asked that they be allowed to have the material to build their own shacks. The quarters had been one large building. Mr Jones said that the natives had preferred smaller separate dwellings which they claimed were warmer.

The aborigines were questioned about their housing and they intimated that they were happy with what they had. They said that they did not want other quarters. In the circumstances it was not insisted that quarters should be built.

Diet: Diet was varied and sufficient. From a good station garden a large variety and quantity of vegetables was supplied to the natives. They have ample fresh meat and bread baked at the station.

...Wages appeared to be very low and this fact was mentioned to Mr. Jones. He agreed to raise wages 10/- in the case of everybody. (PROWA. DAA. ACC. 2819. File 38.209.1951-1968).

In regard to the entries above, the symbol '@' undoubtedly indicated the person's Aboriginal name. The name Kubu is usually written 'Cooboo', stated Dr Maguire. (See Appendix 1).

Of these Aboriginal employees, perhaps the most interesting in relation to the novel, is 60-year-old 'Topsy' whose tribal name is 'Kundri'. An Aborigine named 'Topsy' appears in the earliest archival material, dated 1923, (PROWA. DAA. ACC. 653. File 680/23). This file provides information relating to events which occurred during 1923 and 1924.

On 29 July 1923, J.J. Maguire, who was part-owner of Turee Station, as already stated, addressed a letter to the Officer in Charge of the Police Station at Peak Hill requesting permission for the Station Manager, J. Brown, and his wife to take an Aboriginal family on holiday with them to Queensland. The Aborigines concerned were Duck and Topsy and their child, aged 18 months. The Police Officer, J. Coppinger, PC 1083, forwarded Maguire's request, together with his own report to the Protector of Aborigines at Meekatharra, Sgt J. McDonald.

P.C. Coppinger's Report, together with its idiosyncratic spelling, is as follows:

Herewith please find attached letter received from Mr J Maguire of Turee Creek Station, he is asking for permission to take Native Duck and his woman Topsy and child for a holiday to Queensland.

The natives in question are well known to me, they were brought up at Turee Homestead, are very intelligent and well able to speak english,

I am shure Mr Maguire is well known to you, also Mr J Brown and his wife, Browns wife is Maguires sister.

I recommend that the natives be permitted to visit Queensland as requested as I am quite satisfied they will be well cared for by Mr and Mrs Brown, both are deacent respectable people.

18/8/22                      J. Coppinger - PC 1083.

(PROWA. DAA. ACC. 653. File 680/23).

Sgt J. McDonald forwarded the application to the Deputy Chief Protector of Aborigines in Perth. Thereafter, £25 deposits were paid for each Aborigine and Recognisances Nos

1035 and 1036 were issued in compliance with Section 9 of The Aborigines Act, 1905. A further Recognisance was issued at the last moment because it was discovered that none had been issued for the baby. The Browns and the Aboriginal family travelled together through Queensland from December 1923 until April 1924. They were all back in Western Australia by 22 April 1924.

It is interesting to speculate whether the 'Topsy' referred to in this correspondence was one of the sources for Prichard's information about Aboriginal life on a North-West cattle station. Perhaps she was the Aboriginal girl Prichard talked to 'For hours, day after day', referred to by Ric Throssell (Ric Throssell, 1975, p. 49).

If so, Topsy's child would have been about four-years-old at the time of Prichard's visit and would have been one of the station children with whom the four-year-old Ric played in the dust. Ric Throssell recalls 'tracking imaginary bungarras, running in convincing terror when one of my aboriginal playmates shouted, 'Narloo comin'! Narloo'll get yer! '(Throssell, 1975, p. 49) These children's games were captured by Prichard in the opening scenes of the novel when Coonardoo, Bardi, Wanna and Hugh play together before Hugh leaves for school in Perth: 'Hugh dashed off crying, "Narlu! Narlu!" and the little girls followed him with Wanna in pursuit'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 4).

More importantly, if the 'Topsy' of 1923 is the 60-year-old 'Topsy' of the 1953 Inspector's report, whose tribal name was 'Kundri' this may indicate that she was the prototype of Prichard's Coonardoo. Even though in the 'Introduction' to the novel Prichard expressly stated: 'The Coonardoo I knew and used to ride with, for instance is not the gin whose life-story has been told'. (Prichard, 1929, p. v). On the other hand she also stated: 'when I learnt more about Aboriginal women of out-back stations, I was able to write *Coonardoo* which revealed the character of one of these women'. (Williams, 1963, p. 27).

Dr Maguire expressed the opinion:

'I always thought Topsy was the heroine. I've no proof. I just assumed so as she is like Topsy. Not of course, in the last part.' (Appendix 1).

Ric Throssell also stated:

'Topsy' was indeed the model for much of the characterisation of Coonardoo. There are photographs of her in the red albums annotated in Katharine's writing 'A girl like Coonardoo'. (Ric Throssell to M.V. Austin-Crowe, dated 15 October 1996).

The Aboriginal couple, Topsy and Duck, were very likely Prichard's sources for the working conditions of Aborigines on pastoral station and they possibly gave her information about the forms of the open-sacred ceremonies. It is unlikely that they were able to introduce Prichard to any Aboriginal secret-sacred cultural practices, such as the puberty rituals she describes in the novel.

In her 'Introduction', as already stated, Prichard makes reference to the anthropologist, Basedow. An entry relating to Herbert Basedow (1881-1933) appears in the *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol 7. 1891-1939 (1979) which describes him as an 'anthropologist, geologist, explorer and medical practitioner'. The dictionary article states that Basedow made expeditions in South Australia, the Northern Territory and Western Australia, both as a government geologist and medical practitioner; during which he had opportunity to study Aboriginal languages and culture. Prichard acknowledged Basedow as the source of her ideas regarding the evolutionary status of Aborigines, but her debt to Basedow is far greater than this: a great deal of textual material relating to Aboriginal traditional life and culture which appears in *Coonardoo*

can be shown to have been taken almost intact from Basedow's text, *The Australian Aboriginal* (1925). The dictionary entry refers to this text as:

a positive contribution at a time when little detailed material was available to the public. Basedow was not a socio-cultural anthropologist and was not in a position to provide a systematic analysis of Aboriginal life. However, the book encapsulated his experience with the race over twenty years. (*Australian Dictionary of Biography: 1891-1939*, 1979, vol. 7. p. 203).

Prichard's debt to Basedow was noted by Kay Iseman in her essay, *Katharine Susannah Prichard, 'Coonardoo' and the Aboriginal presence in Australian fiction* (1980), in which Iseman stated:

It is clear from the Foreword to the first edition of the novel that she read Basedow sometime before publication of the novel. There are several direct parallels between Prichard's descriptions and interpretations of aboriginal ceremonies and beliefs and those which he describes. Specifically, the fire dance of the narlu as thief and the initiation ceremonies, involving both adulation of the breasts and mutilation of the flesh, (the later [sic] a most uncommon practice according to recent anthropological evidence) are all described in very similar terms in his study. (Iseman, 1980, p.10).

Prichard's description of the 'breast ceremony' which was part of a series of initiation ceremonies through which young Aboriginal girls passed on their way to mature status in the group, closely follows Basedow's account of the same event. Prichard's text states:

Then one morning during a pink-eye, Warieda had told her he knew where there were bardis in a tree not far from the creek. Coonardoo went off with him to find it. Several men streaked out from the uloo after them and walked a little distance over the plains.

Shy and a little afraid, when she found herself so far from the other women, Coonardoo hung her head and turned to go back to them. But Warieda commanded her to sit down on the ground. He sat down before her, and all the rest of the men sat in a half-circle round them.

Warieda had put his hand on her breasts, and smoothed the round pointed bulbs with gentle fingers. He began to sing in a low, far-away murmuring voice. He was talking and singing about her breasts. Coonardoo understood. She sat quivering and filled with excitement and mystery... She knew very well that Warieda was singing to make her a woman. His hands moved round her breasts, moulding and kneading them. He pasted red ochre mixed with emu grease round the nipples, singing to make them grow quickly, be strong and full of milk to nourish her children.

The rest of the men who were nuba to her ... repeated his words and kept up an accompaniment to his singing, clicking their kylies, swaying and muttering rhythmically.... As Warieda put his mouth to the ruddy nimbus he had made on her budding breast, Coonardoo knew that he was drawing all the thready instincts, deeply buried in her body, towards him. (Prichard, 1929, pp. 19-20).

Basedow's 1925 text includes almost the same details:

Without advertisement, the tender novice is quietly coaxed away from camp by the men, who, by talking kindly to her, have no need to apply coercion. At no great distance they halt, and the future husband anoints the areas surrounding both nipples, which are likely to bulge forth as the future breasts, with grease; the anointed areas are then covered with a layer of red ochre. Whilst this is taking place, all present sing to the budding milk-gland, first softly, then vehemently, and with ceremony.

... The painted areolas are frequently charmed by touching them with a magic stone, and at intervals the enchanters bring an anointed circle into contact with their lips, as if endeavouring to draw the nipple forwards, that it might grow. (Basedow, 1925, p. 19).

As can be seen, Prichard does very little more than interject her fictional character into the situation detailed in Basedow's text.

Prichard describes the second stage of the Aboriginal girl's initiation into womanhood in almost identical terms to Basedow. Prichard writes that Coonardoo:

found herself dancing, scared and naked, at the head of a long line of women under a clear, starry sky.

The women danced and kept on singing until Coonardoo was ready to drop; but Bandogera with hands on her hips pushed her on, giving her little smacks on the back. (Prichard, 1929, p. 23)

**Basedow's account stated:**

An old gin places herself behind the girl and lays her hands upon the latter's shoulders. Then all the other women taking part form a continuous chain by standing in a single row behind each other and 'linking up' in a similar way. They begin to sing 'Ya, Ya, Ya', in a long-drawn melancholy note, and the old gin immediately stamps her feet, and moving forwards, pushes the girl along in front of her.... the old gin stops short and strikes the girl's back thrice with her hand. The same performance is repeated time after time during the night. (Basedow, 1925, p. 252).

Apart from the 'old gin' placing her hands on the girl's shoulders in Basedow's text, and Bandojera with her hands on Coonardoo's hips, in Prichard's, the two accounts are very similar.

**The final initiation of the young girl into womanhood is described by Basedow:**

Then she is requested to lie flat on her back, and her head is placed upon the lap of one of the men who squats to keep it there. It follows the act which is destined to make her marriageable; her virginity is doomed to mechanical destruction.

The instruments, if any, which are used for the operation vary according to locality. In the central areas ... an ordinary stone-knife with resin haft is used. (Basedow, 1925, p. 255).

Prichard's account of the girl's final initiation is, in its essential details, exactly as recounted by Basedow. The text describes this ordeal in relation to Coonardoo:

she knew it would soon be morning, stars were so faint in the sky, when the men sat round her in a ring and she was spread out on the ground before them ....Then in a flash of pain, she heard her own cry, shrill and eerie like the note of a bird. (Prichard, 1929, p. 23)

The actual mutilation is not presented directly but through the outraged sensibilities of Bessie Watt:

Mrs Bessie was clearly annoyed; her white woman's prejudices inflamed.

'Oh, well,' she declared, 'I think it's perfectly disgusting for an old man to destroy a girl's virginity with a stone, like that.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 24).

The serial text omits the final part of the sentence following the word 'disgusting'. (Prichard, *Bulletin*, 5 September 1928, p. 61). Whether this is text which was added in the novel version of *Coonardoo*, or one of the few passages Prichard claimed was edited by the *Bulletin* in the serial version, is a matter of speculation.

Male initiations are also channelled through Bessie's consciousness. During the 'pink-eye' gatherings of the neighbouring groups, the initiations are performed. Bessie can hear the men chanting the Aboriginal words which mean 'cut! cut!' (Prichard, 1929, p. 21). Bessie has made a virtue of non-interference in Aboriginal cultural practices: 'She had never seen a native who was better for breaking with his tribal laws and beliefs'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 13). And so: 'She had been careful not to interfere with her natives in any of their own ways and customs. She tried rather to leave them entirely to themselves in all that did not concern her'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 15). Nevertheless, Bessie signifies her disapproval of male initiations, with their 'crude rites of circumcision and mutilation'. She mutters: 'Devils! Old devils!' when she hears the chants of the men and the booming of the coolardie which accompanies the ritual activity. (Prichard, 1929, p. 22). It is the sexual nature of Aboriginal initiations that Bessie finds disquieting: she senses 'a sadism in them, a whipping-up of sexual excitement in the cruelties practised by old men on boys and girls'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 21).

Intentional cruelty was not an essential element or motivation in the traditional rite of



circumcision. Although Basedow recorded that circumstances had changed in recent years, that is pre-1925. During this period, repeated cases had occurred in which young males attempted to avoid the circumcision rite by escaping to areas outside the jurisdiction of their group elders; some youths had even taken refuge with Europeans. But, Basedow noted, the candidate is never really safe. 'It is usually only a matter of time and he will be ambushed by men of his own tribe and taken back to camp. The operation is then immediately performed, and is made extraordinarily drastic as a punishment'. (Basedow, 1925, p. 243).

The reason for this drastic treatment can be understood in relation to information contained in an essay by Diane Bell, 'Women's business is hard work: Central Australian Aboriginal women's love rituals' (1981). Bell noted that the performance of ritual was regarded as 'work' or 'business' by both men and women; both work to uphold and maintain the law of the ancestors. (Bell, 1981, p. 345). (The women's ritual sphere is discussed later in relation to arranged marriages). Initiations are part of the men's ritual activity essential for the maintenance of the ancestral law and to preserve the link 'to the Dreamtime whence all legitimate authority and power once flowed'. (Bell, 1981, 347-348). The cruelty, reported by Basedow, inflicted on those who tried to avoid initiation, was, undoubtedly, a consequence of the men's fears for the survival of the law of the ancestors. The severity of the ordeal was, possibly, a response to the men's difficulty in carrying out their legitimate business, or work, and, additionally, served as a deterrent to others against future breaches damaging to the ancestral law.

In Prichard's text, Bessie Watt (and possibly, Prichard, herself) regarded the initiation ceremonies essentially as ritual ordeals which permitted the passage into adulthood and conferred status within the group: 'Mrs Bessie understood.... Girls of some of the Nor'-West tribes were subject to a preparation for womanhood as the boys were for manhood'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 24). Bessie interprets the initiations in terms of their socio-cultural function of maintaining group cohesion and affinity with the land: 'Her

people did not wish to lose Coonardoo either. She was theirs by blood and bone, and they were weaving her to the earth and to themselves, through all her senses, appetites and instincts'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 24).

Basedow, additionally, saw the girl's initiation in terms of a propitiatory sacrifice, 'a desire to offer the girl's pudicity to one of her spirit-husbands'. A 'legendary tribal relative who is supposed to be living in the astral form and who is likely to come back to earth at any day'. (Basedow, 1925, p. 256).

But the initiations went beyond group affiliation and cohesion, or propitiatory sacrifice; they were part of a ceremonial and ritual system that functioned to maintain an all-encompassing ontological structure, which had given meaning to Aboriginal culture and society for thousands of years.

In her 'Introduction' to *Wise women of the Dreamtime; Aboriginal tales of the ancestral powers* (1993), Johanna Lambert details the exact nature of the space-time continuum of Aboriginal existence. The Aborigines lived in a created universe that had been formed from the invisible patterns and energies which flowed from the Dreamtime, the epoch which ended before time began and in which the spirit ancestors had their being. At the conclusion of the Dreamtime, Lambert writes: 'the energy and vibrational patterns from the exploits of the great Ancestors congealed the initially limitless space into the topography and forms that we now experience as the material aspect of the universe'. (Lambert, 1993, p. 8). These energies thereafter were retained in every part of the natural world and ritual activity is essential for releasing and renewing this energy.

In relation to the text of *Coonardoo*, this would have positioned Prichard's Aboriginal heroine inside a 'totalistic reality' in which the metaphysical world of past, present and future are at one with the empirical world of all natural phenomena whether of earth or space and which included, landforms and all species of plant and animal life including

humans.

The creative energies emanating from the Dreamtime also formed the psychological and social life of the Aborigines and the relationships between humans and the natural world. These relationships were the ancestral law that had to be maintained for the continued survival and well-being of the group. Lambert described the essential place of myth and ritual in traditional Aboriginal society:

The continuation of the Aborigines' 'Dreamtime law' is assured by the constancy of ritual and ceremonial life in which they enter into ecstatic or trance states, contacting and listening to the voices of the Ancestors echoing from the great Dreamtime. (Lambert, 1993, p. 7).

The hypnotic state produced by the initiatory procedure with its continuous chants, rhythmic dances and its final painful ordeal, produces a state of consciousness in which the 'initiate not only sees the ancestors but discovers his identity with them'.

(Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975, vol III, p. 660). Through the initiation he becomes part of a circular process in which he is reintegrated with the Dreamtime from which he emerged at conception and to which he will return at death.

Prichard's *Coonardoo* makes reference to the three major crises of earthly life: birth, marriage, and death. The distinctive practices in relation to these events are depicted in the text and, once again, they appear to be based on information contained in Basedow's text.

In relation to Aboriginal birth beliefs, Prichard's text states the view, widely held in white society, that: 'The blacks, unenlightened by white people, do not associate the birth of children with any casual sex relationship'. The text states that although a husband might lend his wife in the way of hospitality, 'any children she might have would be her husband's children'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 21).

Basedow's text likewise expressed the view that Aborigines do not regard conception as 'connected primarily with any conjugal liberties a husband or number of tribal husbands may be privileged to enjoy'. (Basedow, 1925, p. 62). Basedow stated that Aborigines did not entirely discount the role of sexuality in the formation of the human being but regarded it as complementary to the action of the totem spirit. (Basedow, 1925, pp. 284-285).

R.M. Berndt also noted that even when Aborigines acknowledge the physical bond between parent and child, the spirit component is the most important aspect of conception. A spirit child was believed to come from the Dreaming and animate the fetus. (Berndt, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975, vol. 2. p. 426). Conception was associated with accidental contact with some object, usually hollow in nature, such as a reed or empty snake skin. (Basedow, 1925, p. 62).

Basedow noted that the whirlwind is particularly dreaded by some groups of Aboriginal women who fear that if it passed over them, the spirit of a child will immediately enter their bodies. (Basedow, 1925, p. 62). The conception of Winni had been attributed to the whirlwind, hence his name Winning-arra. Prichard's 'Glossary of native words' (Prichard, 1929, p. 207) defines 'winni-carra, winning-arra' as whirlwind. (Prichard's inclusions of Aboriginal vocabulary is discussed later in relation to Aboriginal songs and poetry).

Coonardoo has obviously not attributed Winni's conception to her sexual encounter with Hugh. She only learns of this when she hears Mollie and Hugh quarrelling. This leads her to examine Winni's nails and in the shape of his ears she detects a certain likeness to Hugh. Coonardoo is described as pleased and proud 'though the mystery was beyond her understanding' and she retains her belief in 'totemic' conception, telling Winni: 'Out of the winning-arra you came to me, but it was the spirit of Youie in the winning-arra.'

(Prichard, 1929, p. 133).

As she lies dying Coonardoo recalls the sexual encounter with Hugh but still does not understand that he has impregnated her. She mulls over the situation:

And then, was it true, what he said? That Winni was his son, not Warieda's? How could that be? was she not Warieda's wife, given to him by her people, and had not Warieda sent her to Youie when he was alone and baba, grieving for Mumae? (Prichard, 1929, p. 204).

Marriage in Aboriginal society was surrounded by very strict rules in regard to permissible spouses. Basedow's text gave an account of the sectional system which regulated marriage unions but an abundance of other sources were available to Prichard. Even so, the information in the novel is only partly correct. Prichard names the North-West sections, which she terms 'families', as: Banniga, Burong, Baldgery and Kurrimurra. This is confirmed elsewhere, although a variety of spellings is used. But she goes on to say: 'A Banniga woman might be given to a man who was Kurrimurra. Their child would be Burong and could not mate with either Banniga or a Kurrimurra. Beyond that there was room for choice'. (Prichard, 1929, p.21).

In fact, there was no room for choice as marriage within the individual's own section was also forbidden. Berndt noted that: 'The section system uses four labels. Everyone belongs (belonged) from birth to one of these; they are exogamous. (Berndt, 1979, p. 11). Daisy Bates refers to the North-West sections as 'the four great classes', which she names as: Boorong, Banaka, Kymera, Paljeri'. (Bates, 1905, p. 41). She states: 'Persons bearing the same class name must not marry. Severe penalties, frequently death, follow a breach of this law'. Bates had been told by a settler in the Roebourne area,

that the union of Boorong and Boorong is to the natives the union of brother and sister, although there may be no real blood relationship between the pair, and a union of that kind is looked upon with horror, and the perpetrators very severely punished and separated, and if the crime is repeated they are both killed. (Bates, 1905, p. 42).

Both Basedow and Ronald Berndt noted the severe penalties for breaches of the marriage laws. Basedow stated that marriage within the individual's own division is 'forbidden under penalty of death'. (Basedow, 1925, p. 219). Berndt also noted that illegal marriages 'would court disaster, bringing about conflict and spearings'. (Berndt, 1979, p. 13). Thus, in the paradigmatic marriage system presented in the novel only one division would have been available for a legal union, namely, Baldgery.

An early writer on the subject of Aboriginal marriage sections, was Sir John Forrest, who presented a paper to the 1891 Meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science titled: 'The marriage laws of the Aborigines of North-Western Australia' (Forrest, 1891, pp. 653-654). Forrest spelled the sectional names, which he termed 'families', as: 'Banigher', 'Boorunggnoo', 'Paljarie', and 'Kimera'. He noted that marriage could only take place between Boorunggnoo and Banigher, and between Kimera and Paljarie, and that the section of the children was determined by the father. In the case of Boorunggnoo fathers, their children would be Kimera and Kimera fathers would have Boorunggnoo children, alternating from Boorunggnoo to Kimera for ever. Rigid, alternating patterns of marriage and birth sections applied in the case of both males and females. Forrest noted that these rules of legal marriage alliances motivated a great deal of Aboriginal behaviour especially in relation to interactions with members of the opposite sex. Potential marriage partners, for example, Boorunggnoo for Banigher, and Kimera for Paljarie, were carefully avoided, whereas members of the opposite sex who are forbidden in marriage were treated without the least restraint. This rule applied to strangers who visited the group, who would quickly distinguish between members eligible for marriage and must be avoided and those who were in the position of kin and

were obligated to provide hospitality. Forrest concluded: 'This etiquette is always observed, and is readily noticed'. (Forrest, 1891, p. 654). Notably, this observation militates against the notion of promiscuous sexual activity in traditional Aboriginal society.

John J. Withnell, in *The customs and traditions of the Aboriginal Natives of North Western Australia* (1901), recorded that Aboriginal 'marriage laws are very strict'. He names the sections, which he designated 'tribes', as: 'Banaka', 'Paljarri', 'Boorong', and 'Kymera'. He also introduces the term 'Nuba', which, he stated, has the 'meaning tribal wife or tribal husband'. (Withnell, 1901, pp. 14-15). This term is used by Prichard in the novel but only in relation to eligible husbands.

Prichard never doubted the Aboriginal woman's lack of sexual autonomy in traditional Aboriginal society, particularly in relation to 'arranged marriages'. Coonardoo is perceived as a disposable item vulnerable to the whim of her disreputable old father, Joey Koonara. Joey's careful consideration of Geary's offer for Coonardoo casts some doubt on the validity of marriage contracts entered into at the birth of the girl. The text states:

Joey was more than tempted. He found it impossible to refuse so much wealth. It was so long since Warieda had made his bargain, and a rifle - Joey's eyes glistened. (Prichard, 1929, p. 26).

Diane Bell took issue with two views, widely held in white society, in relation to the status of Aboriginal women in traditional society. Notably, the belief that women had no ritual powers and that their services in marriage were bestowed entirely at the whim of a male gerontocracy. Such ideas, she stated, had emanated from male dominated, anthropological research. An example of such reportage occurred in the text by Stanley H. Porteus, *The psychology of a primitive people* (1931). Porteus, an American psychologist, carried out a sociological survey in the Kimberleys and Central Australia

during 1929 at the request of the Australian National Research Council. Porteus upheld the view of the depressed status of Aboriginal women in traditional society. He stated:

women cannot but be in an inferior position. In a marriage alliance, for example, they contribute nothing either of wealth or prestige. They can never be the mothers of tribal heroes but must remain the mere receptacles of new life, the soil from which the ancestral individual springs anew. As an article of property, or an object of barter, woman comes to be regarded as a being of inferior status and must be excluded from any share in the secrets of the tribe. (Porteus, 1931, p. 282).

Bell noted that anthropologists have consistently failed to recognize or record Aboriginal women's ritual activity. (Bell, 1981, p. 347). This, undoubtedly, occurred because anthropologists, both male and female, tended to address their enquiries to male groups and for this reason would not learn of women's sacred ceremonies. Bell noted that 'Aboriginal men cannot and will not discuss women's business'. (Bell, 1981, p. 349).

Bell reported that Aboriginal women in the desert groups she studied performed important rituals concerned with the maintenance of health and harmony in the community, and the 'broad themes of attachment to country'. (Bell, 1981, p. 348). Bell declared that so completely have women's sacred rituals in respect of maintaining country been ignored that their 'tie to the land is deemed by many white observers never to have existed'. (Bell, 1981, p. 354).

In her essay, 'A complex strategical situation: gender and power in Aboriginal Australia' (1981), Annette Hamilton also notes the importance of women's ritual to the community in its power to regulate human relationships and to promote harmony in society and 'as a force for curing and healing the sick'. Hamilton does not deny that precedence is accorded men's ritual and that this is a fundamental element in maintaining male dominance in the community but she notes that certain rituals performed by men and



women are of a complementary nature. For example, those which are essential to ensure the production and increase of plant and animal life. Hamilton states: 'Both men and women, through their rituals and knowledge of song, design, and dance are able to act as mediators of the powers in the natural world'. (Hamilton, 1981, p.80).

The disposal of women's services in marriage at the whim of a male gerontocracy, Bell stated, is also not endorsed by Aboriginal women. In fact, women 'play a decisive role in maintaining the promise system of marriage through their politicking and ceremonial activity during male initiation'. (Bell, 1981, pp. 349-350). The young Aboriginal man is forbidden marriage until he reaches a certain stage in the initiation process and at this stage female-initiated marriages are formally negotiated. Bell noted that in traditional society, 'seen from a woman's point of view, marriage is an evolving serial monogamy' (Bell, 1981, p. 350) wherein women were able to manipulate the marriage system to their own advantage. They contracted a sequence of marriages for themselves which were perceived as progressively more beneficial in terms of the alliances and relationships they were able to establish thereby.

Bell reported that:

Women stated that they used love rituals, *yilpinji* business, to establish and to maintain marriages of their own preference. In these rituals women clearly perceived themselves as independent operators in a domain where they exercised power and autonomy based on their Dreaming affiliations with certain tracts of land. These rights are recognised and respected by the whole society. Women are not, and never were, the pawns in male games, and they have always been actively engaged in establishing and maintaining male/female relationships of their own choosing, that is, they have engaged in women's work. (Bell, 1981, p. 350).

Bell noted that 'women exercise wide choice in second and subsequent marriages'. In the case where they go to a much younger man it is because the woman wishes to do so. Neither does the man enter the marriage as a duty but because he is 'desperately in love

with an irresistible woman'. (Bell, 1981 , p. 366). The success of the match has been achieved through the performance of *yilpinji*. In turn harmonious marriages have important consequences for the well-being of the entire community.

Bell's statements can be set against the situation in Prichard's novel which saw the aged Meenie as unmarriageable. Hugh believes, 'Meenie was old now. It was not likely she would be sought or demanded'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 139). In light of Bell's information, Meenie would not have been, entirely, subject to male disposal but could 'exercise wide choice in second and subsequent marriages'. (Bell, 1981, p. 366). She would also possess the ritual knowledge to bring about the desired marriage and ensure its success.

Catherine Berndt, in 'Aboriginal women and the notion of 'the marginal man' (1979), also takes issue with the postulation of an exclusively male secret-sacred domain and the powerlessness of women in traditional society. Berndt argues that because women were secure in their role of economic providers and because they exercised informal influence at domestic level, they had been lenient in their acceptance of men in a 'managerial role' in religious matters. Catherine Berndt stressed the co-operative nature of traditional Aboriginal society, particularly in relation to sharing, a fact not noted by Europeans except in the sensational topic of 'wife-lending'. Berndt, like Bell, doubts that this was as prevalent a custom as the European newcomers imagined. She states that, undoubtedly some Aboriginal men were prepared to use 'women as bargaining items, for their own advantage, just as others tried to check such moves'. But adds that, following European settlement, the exploitation of Aboriginal women, just like the exploitation of Aborigines in general, by the newcomers 'far overshadowed anything of the sort that may have gone on in traditional Aboriginal Australia'. (Berndt, 1979, p. 36).

In Prichard's text the notion of Aboriginal women as powerless and lacking sexual autonomy is demonstrated in the sketch which finds Coonardoo and Bardi alone on the cattle station when Sam Geary and a miner arrive there. Hugh and the Aboriginal men

are out mustering in the distant ranges but Geary and the miner remain overnight; demanding food and whisky and the sexual services of the Aboriginal women on the station. Coonardoo can hear Geary and the miner quarrelling:

'No.' Geary's voice, thick and insistent, soared and foundered.  
'Coonardoo's mine. You can have Bardi.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 180).

The only repercussion Geary anticipates for his actions is the, possible, displeasure of Hugh. The following morning 'Geary was rather in a hurry to be off before Hugh came in. He was uneasy in his mind about how Hugh would regard the french leave he had taken with his house and women'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 181). The women are categorised as Hugh's property but their defilement is considered of less significance than the misuse of Hugh's residential property.

A degraded position for Aboriginal women in traditional society, is denied by R.M. Berndt. It is true, he says, that in marriage men exercised more rights over their partner than women did, but the complementary nature of their social and economic roles was such that 'the status of women in Aboriginal society was not depressed'. (Berndt, Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975, vol. 2. p. 426).

Diane Bell noted that the power exercised by Aboriginal women in the community has diminished with the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society. Women's influence remains highest where family group and community co-incide, for example, on some pastoral stations and homeland centres, but in the larger more heterogeneous settlements, they have no role in family or community decisions. (Bell, 1981, p. 347).

By the time of Prichard's arrival in the North-West the status of Aboriginal women was undoubtedly very depressed. Interviews with women of the Yammatji linguistic group, included in Bryan Clark's *Yammatji: Aboriginal memories of the Gascoyne* (1992), revealed, almost unanimously, that women were powerless in the matter of 'arranged

marriages' and that young girls were given away in marriage by their fathers. Dolly Butler, who was born about 1915 on Wandagee Station, near Camarvon, recalled that she was about 18 when she was given away by her father and that:

'Back then, when the father give you away, you got to stay with the man and be his wife. He just took me to him and said, That's him now. I give you away.

'If you don't do what your old dad wants, then they start to get wild and give you a hiding.... All us young girls was treated like that.' (Clark, 1992, p. 25).

The textual presentation of the final crisis in earthly life occurs in relation to Warieda's death by boning. Prichard's text closely follows Basedow's account of the procedures which constitute the boning ritual. In both the novel and the anthropological text, the victim's reaction to the news he has been boned is instantaneous. Prichard writes:

One of the Nuniewarra boys warned Warieda that the moppin had pointed a bone at him. Warieda went sick almost immediately, would not eat, said he had guts-ache, moped disconsolately, and felt he was going to die. (Prichard, 1929, p. 136).

One or two eye-witnesses to the boning ceremony are the bearers of the news to the victim in Basedow's account. Thereupon:

Overcome with consternation and terror, the fellow immediately begins to fret; and death will inevitably be the outcome, unless the counter-influence of a medicine man or other tribal power can make itself felt beforehand. (Basedow, 1925, p. 175).

Hugh attempts to divert the impending disaster to Warieda and sends for the moppin-garra from Nuniewarra; but neither threats nor bribes can persuade the 'half-crazy old man' to 'take the bulya out of Warieda'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 137). The moppin-garra goes through a semblance of ritual but his lack of sincerity is apparent even to Hugh who knows that: 'Ordinarily the moppin-garra would be sprawling all over the sick man,

kneading and scrabbling him with frenzied fingers'. He would suck or draw the supposed poison from the afflicted man and then, by sleight of hand, would triumphantly produce some object, shell, bone, or pebble as the cause of the problem. The text states that the sufferer 'usually responded to the suggestion that he was going to be quite well now'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 138).

Basedow also reported the crawling over the body, the biting and kneading of the skin and the eventual location of the poison site by the Nangarri, who, 'with feigned exaltation', would produce some article: small stick, a bone, pebble, meteoric bomb, or a talon, as the cause of the 'affliction' and thereafter, the victim's recovery would be speedy and complete. 'Without the Nangarri's interception, the "boned" fellow would have fretted himself to death for a certainty'. (Basedow, 1925, pp. 181-182).

The fictional moppin-garra has his own malicious agenda for the boning and for failing to perform the correct ritual necessary for Warieda's recovery: the moppin-garra's son had a right to claim Warieda's daughter Beilaba in marriage, but 'Warieda gave Beilaba to Wanna'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 137).

Prichard's text reveals that the ownership of female sexuality was as great a hazard to Aboriginal men as it was to Aboriginal women. Warieda risks his life defending his right to the pubescent Coonardoo when he fights a young man from a distant tribe who tries to abduct her (Prichard, 1929, p. 25) and, ultimately, it is his proprietorship of his daughter's sexuality, which provokes the boning ritual which causes his death.

The death of a husband was the cause of great hardship for his spouse(s) in Aboriginal society and this fact is noted by both Prichard and Basedow. In the fictional text the details of the mourning are mediated through the consciousness of Hugh who for weeks hears the sound of wailing emanating from the uloo each morning, as Coonardoo, Meenie and Winni grieve for the death of Warieda. Coonardoo continues with her

domestic work at the homestead as usual but Hugh knows that beneath her gina-gina her body bears the gashes of sharp stones and that: 'In the camp she would live silent and retired for weeks, as a widow; Meenie also'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 139).

When a man died, Basedow reported: 'The person who fares worst is a widow'.

(Basedow, 1925, p. 212). She will live in silence and apart from the community in a small humpy and will eat nothing for the duration of the mourning ceremonies.

Basedow stated that if the widow fails to 'observe the strictest rules of tribal mourning', then, 'the spirit will see that her late husband's memory is not sufficiently revered, and it will starve the woman to death'. (Basedow, 1925, p. 212).

Basedow documented the Aboriginal practice of disposing of the widow: 'A woman, upon the decease of her husband, becomes the property of her late partner's brother; if there are [sic] more than one brother surviving, she falls to the senior among them'. (Basedow, 1925, p. 213).

Similarly Coonardoo and Meenie become the property of Warieda's brother. Prichard writes:

Coonardoo? Hugh wondered what would happen to her. He knew Warieda's brother, who was one of Geary's boys, was entitled to claim her. Hugh did not intend to surrender Coonardoo. Or Meenie for that matter. (Prichard, 1929, p. 139).

The Aboriginal dimension of the text is largely taken up with the socio-cultural practices outlined above. But Prichard also included elements from the aesthetic-creative sphere of traditional Aboriginal life: the corroborees; the myths and legends; and traditional and contemporary songs.

In relation to corroborees this is one aspect of Aboriginal culture that Prichard is known

to have experienced directly. She had been a spectator at a corroboree during her visit to the North-West but it was a performance especially arranged for her benefit.

Interview information revealed that Duck, the boss of the Aboriginal camp and Topsy, the High Lady of the camp, had been asked to put on a performance for Prichard. The Aboriginal men had come to the homestead during the evening and had jumped around showing how the kangaroo moved, etc. (see Appendix 1). This, possibly, gave rise to Prichard's statement: 'As I saw the corroboree, it was the most thrilling and dramatic performance I've ever seen,' (Throssell, 1975, p. 51).

Kay Iseman's statement that there is a 'direct parallel' between Prichard's description of corroborees, particularly the 'fire dance of the narlu as thief' (Iseman, 1980, p. 10), and Basedow's text, is not entirely correct. Prichard's corroborees have elements in common with Basedow's text but they do not appear to have been taken directly from it.

The corroborees that appear in *Coonardoo* are taken almost intact from the text of *Brumby Innes*, Prichard's three-act play of 1926. The play remained unpublished until 1940 and was first performed in 1972. (Throssell, 1974, p. ix). Prichard's 'Preface to 1940 edition' of *Brumby Innes* suggests that she used primary sources for the songs in the corroborees in the play. She stated:

The Song of the Stranger' and 'The Song of the Mate' in Act I are both authentic fragments in an ancient language of the Gnulloonga tribe. Words of the narloo corroboree are in a local dialect. The gins seemed afraid to give me the ancient word. They would only say: 'Sing go away narloo... come dark,' waving to the hills. 'Narloo, eagle-hawk... like smoke... moon, maybe.' (Prichard, 1974, p. 51).

Both the play and the novel contain dances and songs featuring the mythical narlu and fire/fertility. In both texts the choreography and the costumes of the performers in the narlu/ narloo corroboree are almost identical. The narlu corroboree in the play includes a prelude in which a stranger stands gazing across the land and before entering it he spits

to placate the narlus who own the land. The stage directions continue:

From the darkness... the narloo comes hopping. He seems to come from the horizon, a crouched figure, hopping low, like a frog, all his bones outlined with white, a huge face of white bark over his head. A fearsome figure, he hops and crouches right up to the fire, peers at the women and children. Still singing, their voices quivering with fear and excitement, they watch him, beating their sticks. NARDADU's voice shrills out as she steps forward and threatens the narloo with her stick... The narloo wavers before the old woman's threatening figure and upheld stick. He retreats backwards, thwarted, intimidated, and hops off into darkness across the plains again... (Prichard, 1940, p. 55).

In *Coonardoo*, the narlu ceremony commences in the same way:

From darkness far out across the plain, a squat figure had come, crouched and hopping, all his bones outlined with white, a huge shield of white bark for a face. He had hopped up to the fire, peering at the women and children sitting, singing in two rows, on the other side of the fire.

...Old Gnardadu, standing up at the end of the women, had waved her stick at him, her voice rising in anger and exultation as she threatened him. The singing of the women shrilled, thrilling and awe-stricken, although they sang of their fearlessness and defiance, until the narlu quailed intimidated and hopped away backwards, disappearing far out across the plain where the stars dropped into the earth. (Prichard, 1929, pp. 17-18).

In both the fire/fertility corroborees the descriptions of the head-dresses is again very similar: in *Brumby Innes* the chief performer wears 'a high white head-dress like a spider's web, erect from his head and jutting over his forehead. (Prichard, 1940, p. 56). In *Coonardoo* this becomes 'a head-dress like a gigantic spider-web with a veranda out from it. The spider-web bound with white down, stood high up and juttet out from his forehead'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 23).

The overall significance of the fire corroborees appears to be the same in both the play and the novel. The stage directions in *Brumby Innes* describe the performance of the male lead who: 'gestures and dances before the fire with gaiety and abandon which



suggest the Dionysia, working himself into such a frenzy that he stands shivering, overwrought'. (Prichard, 1940, p. 56). The rites performed during the Greek festivals of Dionysia are believed to have originated in the worship of the gods of fertility and in *Coonardoo* this was the purpose attributed by Saul Hardy to the secret-sacred ritual of the 'fire' corroboree that no woman or child must witness, but which Bessie Watt is privileged to watch.

Chitali danced before the fire ...His body streaked and patterned white and red, Chitali had gestured and danced, knees wide over the fire.  
(Prichard, 1929, p.23)

Saul Hardy attempts to interpret the ritual of the ceremonial dance. He has an inkling that it has a mystical creative function but can only explicate this at a fairly superficial level: a one for one cross-correspondence between the symbolic and the real. The best Saul can offer is:

'I don't know. It had some sex significance, I suppose. Fire is male. They believe smoke caused by the men in these dances impregnates some female spirit of things which dispenses life - for birds, beasts, coolyahs, bardis. The abos themselves, I think.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 23).

Bessie senses a transcendental dimension to the ritual dance, the entrance to 'another world, the world mystic, elusive, sensual and vital of this primitive people's imagination'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 22). At the same time she is conscious of a shadowy world of infinite spaces and is fearful lest she become part of them.

A commentary on Prichard's presentation of the corroborees in *Brumby Innes* is included as an appendix to the 1974 edition of the play. In 'Notes on the Aborigines in *Brumby Innes*' (1974), Carl von Brandenstein gives details of the mythical narlus (Naalus, Narloos) who were neither ghosts (Prichard, 1929, p. 62) nor 'evil spirits' (Prichard, 1940, p. 122) as Prichard claimed but human-like creatures, of an older race than the Aborigines. Narlus inhabited the rocky lands of the North-West, possessed

individual names, some of them were responsible for inventing songs and music. Aboriginal women particularly feared the narlus who possessed 'an enormous penis' which could 'stretch for miles under ground to reach and hold unsuspecting women who might become pregnant by this approach'. (von Brandenstein, 1974, p. 102).

Von Brandenstein sees a similarity between the narlus and the satyrs of Greek legend in that both were named individuals and inventors of songs and music. But Sue Hosking in her article, 'Two corroborees: Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Brumby Innes* and Mudrooroo's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*' (1992), deplored the practice of equating Greek mythological traditions with purely Aboriginal cultural artefacts. Hosking referred particularly to Prichard's directions for the secret-sacred corroboree in *Brumby Innes* in which the dancer 'gestures and dances before the fire with gaiety and an abandon which suggests the Dionysia'. (Prichard, 1940, p. 56). Hosking stated that Prichard's mention of Dionysia implies a 'sexual riot that is not normally associated with the culture she is observing'. (Hosking, 1992, p. 13). Aboriginal society, in any case, did not directly connect fertility with sexual activity.

In the text corroborees are performed during 'pink-eye', the annual midsummer gathering 'for the tribes for a hundred miles about'. During this time at the 'uloo they ate, sang and corroboreed all day'. (Prichard, 1929, pp.16-17). The text also states that:

Usually Mrs Bessie had been generous with rations for pink-eye. She had given bags of flour and sugar for the gathering, content that her people should not wish to wander. In all her years on Wyaliba they had not been away on pink-eye once. (Prichard, 1929, p. 75).

In the historical situation pink-eye was an important part of Aboriginal life on Turee Station; but even during the period when Prichard was resident at Turee Station the Aborigines usually left the station and joined their neighbours about fifty miles away. (see Appendix 1). Twenty-five years after Prichard's visit the owner of the station

reported that it was sometimes difficult to get the station workers to return. On 24 March, 1951, Mrs Doris Maguire, wrote to the Commissioner of Native Affairs, S.G. Middleton, complaining that: 'Firstly, our natives went 'pinkeye' in November - now our Manager writes that he is having difficulty in getting them home again... A couple of years ago - I found a similar situation and wrote down to your Dept'. (PROWA. DAA. ACC.2819. File 38.209. 1951-1968).

Corroborees are still an important social activity in Aboriginal life, as is recorded by Dolly Boonga, a member of the Indjibandi tribal group. Dolly was born in about 1934, and she recalled her early years when with her parents she moved seasonally from one pastoral property to another. Dolly stated:

'We had corroboree all the time. We dance on it, too, when we little. They don't dance here, but up my way they did. They still dance corroboree at Onslow. They teaching the kids, like they teachd us in the olden time. I could still teach the young girl to put on corroboree dance, but they all shy. They all been to school now. They think about the 'Wadjalla' (European) dance all the time. That's sad, isn't it?' (Clark, 1992, p. 110).

Myths and legends are part of Prichard's reconstruction of Aboriginal culture in the text of *Coonardoo*. Prichard claimed to be very circumspect in her approach to Aboriginal legends. In her letter to Vance and Nettie Palmer dated 17 October, 1926, written from Turee Station, she stated: 'I feel "to honour bound" not to touch the legends'. She expressed disapproval of cross-cultural intrusions when she commented on the literary aspirations of her hostess, Mrs Doris Maguire, who Prichard complained:

has no quality of language, capacity for imagery, or ability to see natural values. You know what I mean, weaving our psychology and sentimental morality over native legends. I've been trying to show her how to do them on their own merits - to see things as the black see them. (Throssell, 1975, p. 49).

The elements of Aboriginal myths, stories and legends are discussed by R.M. Berndt

and C.H. Berndt in their work, *The speaking land: myth and story in Aboriginal Australia* (1988). The Berndts emphasised that a fundamental element in all Aboriginal myths is attachment to a specific stretch of land. They stated that: 'No myth is free-floating, without some local identification'. (Berndt and Berndt, 1988, p. 5). The land is a part of the people and it is the land which is speaking through the myth. The Berndts described landforms as 'physiographic sites' (Berndt and Berndt, 1988, p. 6) which can be regarded as the chapter headings of a book the contents of which can be read by those who know how to decipher the language.

J. Yami Lester, the Director of the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs also made this point:

Aboriginal culture cannot be separated from the land. On the land are stories, Aboriginal stories that explain why people, rock holes, the hills and the trees came to be there. The land is full of stories. Every square mile is just like a book, a book with a lot of pages, and it's all a story for the children to learn. (Lester, 1981, p. 21).

Warieda's tale of the formation of the granite crag in the Nungarra hills is of this nature. The legend is told by Warieda on the journey to the coast with the semi-conscious Hugh Watt who is suffering the effects of sunstroke and typhoid fever. The story has the elements of Dreamtime legends which recount the landscaping activities of the spirit ancestors as they moved through the land forming its topographical features, but the story appears to refer to human actions performed in the distant past. Warieda relates:

'Before my mother grow... before her mother, weary bugger years... big blackfellow kill people and eat 'em ....Young fellow movingar, make cloud, send lightning, tear up old fellow, send him into earth. He make stone ... big stone over there in hills. Nungarra.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 70).

The mention of 'movingar' suggests the action is performed by human agency.

Prichard's 'Glossary of native words' gives movin-garra as an alternative for moppin-garra, which means 'magician'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 207). Warieda's speech is ethnically

marked in the narration of this legend and it appears somewhat surprising later in the text when Warieda dies and Hugh mourns him as: 'Warieda who understood and talked like a white man'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 138).

The tale of the 'Emu and the Turkey' which Coonardoo relates to the children is possibly based on the Aboriginal legend 'Dinewan, the emu and Goomble-gubbon, the turkey', which first appeared in K. Langloh Parker's 1896 collection of Aboriginal legends.

Prichard was familiar with Langloh Parker's text. In a footnote in *Literature and the Aborigine in Australia* (1978), J.J. Healy stated:

In a private letter to the present writer, dated 6 February 1968, Henrietta Drake-Brockman related a conversation with Katharine Prichard, from which it appears that Tom Prichard, her father, had bought *Australian Legendary Tales* at the time of first publication, 1896. (Healy, 1978, p. 152).

The tale is included in the 1953 edition of Parker's *Australian legendary tales*, edited by Henrietta Drake-Brockman. Parker relates that Goomble-gubbon tricks Dinewan into cutting off her wings by positing flightlessness as a prerequisite to social hegemony; and Dinewan counters by suggesting to Goomble-gubbon that fewer meant superior chicks causing the turkey to kill all but two of her offspring. In the 'Introduction' to the collection, titled 'About these stories', Drake Brockman suggested that the social purpose of the tale is to ventilate the dangers of social snobbery and maternal vanity, and to foster the 'idea of family limitation for economic reasons', even though the practice is savage in application. (Drake Brockman, 1953, p.v).

The tale Coonardoo recites has no substantive comment to make on social relationships beyond a possible caution against trusting people. Coonardoo tells the children:

'Turkey bin argument with emu, which one better women... Turkey say, emu go walkabout all day; got no kids. Emu say, "Eeh-mm, got weary bugger (plenty) kids." Emu go bush, come back with plenty kids. Turkey got only cootharra (two) kids. Turkey say emu can't run so fast; emu run

to creek and come back again. Say turkey can't run so fast. Turkey run to creek, little way, go up, fly ... leave kids with emu.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 111).

There are many versions of the tale of Emu and Turkey told throughout Australia. Berndt and Berndt in *The speaking land* (1988) noted that stories such as Emu and Turkey which emphasised 'situation and character interaction' rather than aspects of the landscape were very unusual but had been noted by Tonkinson in the Jigalong area, which is west of Turee Creek. (Berndt and Berndt, 1988, p. 11).

In *Aboriginal victors of the desert crusade* (1974), Tonkinson stated that the situational and interaction myths which validate aspects of Aboriginal culture or characteristics of some variety of fauna, such as the 'emu and bustard' were the province of women and children. (Tonkinson, 1974, p. 73). He recorded that many myths, such as those relating to the travels and creation of natural features, were known only to initiated men. These myths are lengthy and are associated with ancestral beings whose exploits are encapsulated in song lines associated with important rituals. (Tonkinson, 1974, p. 73).

Aboriginal songs are a further expression of Aboriginal artistic traditions which have been incorporated into the text of *Coonardoo*. These Prichard claimed in the 'Introduction' to the novel were 'authentic fragments', the 'jewels of the primitive imagination' which had been 'garnered' by those who were conversant with Aboriginal culture, namely, Ernest Mitchell, and James Withnell and his sister, Mrs James Muirdick. Only men and women like these good friends of hers, Prichard claimed, could be trusted to know the 'sound and meaning of words in melodies sung by the blacks'. (Prichard, 1929, p. vi).

With the exception of Winni's song, '*Nungardie naju, karri chitar-aima warra naju*' (Prichard, 1929, p. 191) in which Winni expresses his longing for his Mother's return, the songs which have been included in the text have little emotional force or even

relevance in the plot. The 'Song of the little kangaroos' has significance because of its intimate association with Coonardoo. It serves to evoke the heroine even when she is absent from the story. After her expulsion from Wytaliba, the Aborigines hear Hugh singing 'Coonardoo's little song... He sang in a thin, childish voice, as if it were Coonardoo singing when she was a little girl'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 191). The song of the little kangaroos' also functions to provide structural balance: it is sung by the child Coonardoo in the opening chapter and by the aged and dying Coonardoo in the final chapter.

Prichard retained the songs in the Aboriginal language when she presented them in the text, and translated them in parentheses. In 'Notes on the Aborigines in *Brumby Innes*' (1974), Carl von Brandenstein noted that Prichard incorporated words from Ngaala-warnnga, the language spoken by the socio-linguistic group known as Ngalla. Prichard referred to this group as 'Gnulloonga' in the Preface to the 1940 edition, and as 'Gnarler' in the text of *Coonardoo*. Von Brandenstein stated:

The tribe speaking the *Ngaala* dialect is known to linguists as the South *Pandjima*.... Turee Creek, the station K.S.P. visited in 1927 [sic], is in the heart of South *Pandjima* territory. (von Brandenstein, 1974, p. 101).

Prichard stated: 'Many of the corroboree songs, or tabee, are in a dead language, it seems'. (Prichard, 1929, p. vi). Carl von Brandenstein noted that Prichard's reference to 'tabee', or 'tabi' is inaccurate. (von Brandenstein, 1974, p. 101). In his essay, 'Tabi songs of the Aborigines' (1969), von Brandenstein stated that tabi is not correctly applied to corroborees which are performed by groups, but to the 'artistic expression of one person'. Von Brandenstein reported:

But in the north-west, the Tabi is still the most common and alive type of music. It could be called a piece of poetry set to music and usually performed by the poet composer, who also plays the accompaniment. A man should sing in honour of dead friends and relatives, of heroic deeds of the past, in praise of his homeland's beauty, or sing of the travels and mysteries of his dreams and, more recently and frequently, in excitement

over technical wonders, such as ships, railways, cars and aeroplanes.  
(von Brandenstein, 1969, p. 28)

Warieda's 'Song of the Steam Engine' (Prichard, 1929, p. 70) and possibly Winni's song, 'Mother mine, I stand and wait for you, but I will return and bring something pleasing for you in the way of food'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 191) come into this category.

In relation to the artistic dimension of Aboriginal culture presented in *Coonardoo*, it would seem that Prichard derived her material from a variety of sources. These sources included collections of Aboriginal poetry and songs in the possession of the white colonisers mentioned in her 'Introduction'. In some instances, in the case of the corroborees, for example, information was taken at first hand from Aborigines on Turee Station. In respect of Aboriginal traditional social forms, these are largely based on Basedow's text and these borrowings from ethnography argue against Prichard's claim that *Coonardoo* is based on direct experience. This statement has been accepted at face value by many literary critics. Notably, Henrietta Drake-Brockman who believed:

Critics forget the original research that made this work, for many people, an introduction to native lore and *mores*. Nowadays a considerable library devoted to anthropological and ethnological studies is available to supply background facts for creative writers; but then Katharine Susannah Prichard spent months on an outback cattle-station learning at first hand, and devilled for what she could glean elsewhere. (Drake-Brockman, 1967, p. 25).

A great deal of Prichard's material was, necessarily, gleaned from beyond the boundaries of Turee Station. When Prichard made her field trip to the North-West traditional Aboriginal life had all but disappeared as a consequence of the economic development of the region. Of the economic forces causing the disruption to Aboriginal life, the pastoral industry was perhaps the most significant but other industries, notably gold mining and pearl-shell fishing, had a deleterious effect upon the Aboriginal people and their society. The discussion in the next chapter centres on the goldmining and the pearl-shell fishing industries in the North-West region.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **GOLD MINING and the PEARLING INDUSTRY**

Goldmining and pearl-shell fishing made a notable contribution to the economic development of the North-West. The inclusion of these industries in *Coonardoo* is an important element in the construction of a 'realistic' background to the novel. Even so, in the case of both industries, their presentation in the novel is largely in terms of the earliest stages of their development. Thus the textualisation of goldmining and pearl-shell fishing activities in the novel's chronology is largely asynchronous with the parallel historical situation. But as both industries are largely peripheral to the principal action of the story, this does not become a problem in the text.

Goldmining, in fact, never emerges as a successful enterprise in the novel but remains at its exploratory stage. In the wider historical context goldmining became, for awhile, an important industry in the North-West, bringing thousands of miners to the region. From the mid-1880s numerous gold strikes were made in the area and goldmining was still taking place on a limited scale at the time of Prichard's visit to the North-West.

The textual presentation of the pearl-shell fishing industry is both fragmentary and retrospectively conveyed. Here again, the earliest phase of the industry provides data for the plot: Prichard presented the conditions which prevailed in the industry before legislation was enacted to safeguard Aborigines. Although, it should be noted, when legislation was enacted it was often ignored or ineffective.

Finally, this chapter will show that the working practices of goldmining and pearling had a corrosive influence on Aboriginal society and had a pernicious effect on Aboriginal health.

The goldmining industry enters the text in relation to the sub-plot gold prospecting activities of Cock-Eyed Bob. The goldmining dimension in the novel is of secondary importance in the construction of 'realism' in the novel but there is, nevertheless, a noticeable disparity between the situation depicted in the novel and historical events in relation to gold exploration. Throughout the story Bob engages in fossicking the hills and mountain ranges of the North-West. His gold explorations continue unabated from approximately the year 1885 until the end of the story: Prichard's contemporary 1928. During this period Bob expresses no awareness of any gold discoveries in his immediate vicinity. In the historical situation spectacular gold strikes were being made in the Kimberleys and the North-West, but Bob neither joins the various 'rushes' nor appears to notice the gold-mining activity taking place around him. (Although, as will be discussed later, the text at one point suggests something of an alternative history for Bob).

Bob is introduced at the beginning of the novel when he is described as a 'slight boyish figure'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 5). The year is, approximately, 1885. He arrives at Wytaliba with Geary who has undertaken to deliver eight-year-old Hugh to the ship which is taking him south to school in Perth. Before Geary leaves for the coast, he tells Bessie:

'Bob'll look after you until our horses are spelled a bit. Then he's going out prospectin' in the To-Morrow. Reckons he can smell gold out there, and'll be making our fortunes one of these days.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 6).

There is no discrepancy in this passage between the fictional events and the historical situation because payable gold was not discovered in the North-West region until 1888. Bob's optimism is also accurately drawn; from the beginnings of white settlement in the North-West, it had been anticipated that gold would be found in the region. This interest was kept alive by the occasional discovery of small amounts of gold. J.H.M. Honniball in 'E.H. Laurence, Stipendiary Magistrate' (1975), recorded that early in August 1870

news of a gold discovery on the Irwin River caused great excitement and brought many hopeful miners to the region. The Government Resident of the Greenough district, E.H. Laurence, was instructed to join the 'rush' and report on the situation. But the 'rush' was very short-lived and even on his journey to the area Laurence encountered groups of miners returning to Greenough and Geraldton. Laurence reported that very little gold was discovered; nuggets varied in size from a 'very small pin's head to a small pea'. But even so, he regarded it as evidence that a goldfield would be discovered and that this 'is now merely a matter of time'. In fact, Honniball noted: 'Long years were yet to pass before a goldfield was found sufficiently rich to give the Cinderella colony the same impetus it had given her eastern sisters since 1851'. (Honniball, 1975, p. 17).

From the earliest days of the Swan settlement it had been anticipated that sooner or later payable gold would be found in Western Australia. Consequently, legislation was deemed necessary to ensure future government control of any gold discovered. In August 1886, the *Goldfields Act, 1886* (WA) was passed regulating gold exploration and mining in the colony.

Section 6 of the Act stated:

a warden may issue documents, each of which shall be called a 'Miner's Right', and which shall be in force for any number of years not exceeding ten... at a rate of Twenty shillings for every year for which the same is in force. (*Goldfields Act, 1886* (WA), s. 6).

Section 10 and 11 dealt with leases of land for mining. These Leases could not exceed twenty-one years and the annual rent was one pound per acre. A Lease could not 'embrace areas exceeding twenty-five acres'. (*Goldfields Act, 1886* (WA), ss. 10 & 11).

The first goldfield in the Swan Colony was discovered in 1885 by Jack Slattery and Charles Hall in the Kimberley region. W.L. Lambden Owen, in his memoirs, *Cossack*

*gold: the chronicles of an early Goldfields Warden* (1933), stated:

The news from the Kimberleys reverberated throughout Australia and New Zealand, creating immense excitement. It is estimated that in two years it drew fully ten thousand men to the area. (Owen, 1933, p. 84).

Owen recorded that it was unknown how much gold the Kimberley fields produced, but it was definitely known that in 1886 the 3 000 diggers scattered about gained 'a fair amount', possibly about £500 each, making a total of £1 500 000 from just the rank and file of miners. To this figure should be added the rich strikes such as at Mount Dockrell where £10 000 worth of gold was found just lying about the surface. (Owen, 1933, pp. 89-90).

But this first strike proved to be disappointing and after four years there was only one mine still operational in the Kimberleys.

A.C. Angelo, who joined many of the rushes, recalled that in the exodus from this first goldfield hundreds of disappointed men roamed the region and many lives were lost.

He recorded:

For months impoverished men were wending their way on foot to one or other of the two ports, jettisoning their few meagre belongings so as to lighten their loads. Guns, rifles, revolvers, picks, shovels and even swags and clothing were littered along the two main roads. (Angelo, 1948, p. 39).

The first gold discovery in the North-West region was made in January 1888 by Jimmy Withnell, son of John and Emma Withnell. Jimmy and his brother were working on the family's holding, Mallina Station, near Whim Creek when Jimmy noticed crows raiding his tucker-bag. The rock he shied at the crows gleamed in the sunlight and Jimmy discovered that it contained flecks of gold. (Taylor, 1980, p. 224). Some years earlier Jimmy had met the Kimberley miners, Slattery and Hail, and had learned from them how to recognise auriferous country and the type of rock likely to contain gold.

Nancy Withnell Taylor recorded: 'Bush telegraph broadcast the news of the find and caused a sensation throughout the colony as well as in the eastern colonies'. In Roebourne businesses closed and 'men, women and children streamed to the find. It was like mushrooming, bits of gold were everywhere, lumps of pure alluvial gold'. (Taylor, 1980, p. 226).

Those who could not leave for the Mallina field 'formed syndicates to finance a trusted envoy' wrote W.L. Lambden Owen. He also recorded that the only tangible result of his own speculation in such a venture was the loss of his money. (Owen, 1933, p. 69). Gold at this period, noted Owen, 'was at four sovereigns the ounce troy'. (Owen, 1933, p. 71).

Jenny Hardie, in *Nor'Westers of the Pilbara breed* (1981), recorded that the 'Mallina reef was never a prolific producer'. (Hardie, 1981, p. 72). But the discovery of the Mallina reef resulted in the rush to the region and the discovery of alluvial and reef gold near the Pilbarra Creek. The Pilbarra (now spelt with one 'r') was officially declared a goldfield on 1 October 1888. The Pilbarra field, together with the nearby Egina, Hong Kong, Toweranna, and Station Peak fields, produced 11 170 oz in 1889 and 16 055 oz in 1890. (Hardie, 1981, p. 73). De La Rue recorded that:

By 1902, 194 590 crude ounces of gold had been deposited in Perth from the Pilbarra field, and, at the very least, over 500 000 ounces were taken from the field during the 50 years after its proclamation. (De La Rue, 1979, pp. 91-92).

W.L. Lambden Owen, who became the second Warden of the Pilbarra goldfield, recorded the luck and the bad luck of the prospectors in the Pilbarra. Owen stated that the Pilbarra field produced more 50 oz nuggets than any other Western Australian goldfield and that the largest nugget found on the Pilbarra was discovered accidentally by Bobby Norton who was walking barefoot to the Pilbarra and stubbed his toe against a

nugget which 'weighed one hundred and five ounces (worth about £400)'. (Owen, 1933, pp. 77- 78).

Owen gives details of another excited rush in the Roebourne area which began when an Aboriginal station worker following a dray and laying out fence-posts found a twenty-seven ounce gold nugget which had been churned up by the steel tyre of the dray. (Owen, 1933, p. 71). Once again an efficient bush telegraph announced the news and all business in Roebourne came to a standstill whilst the entire population turned out to fossick the area. Owen stated 'It was like mushrooming. The bits were everywhere. In a few days the surface was picked bare, the Roebourmites returning to their homes'. (Owen, 1933, pp. 71-72).

Owen recalls the misfortune of Ben Christie, who was, possibly, the original discoverer of gold in the Pilbarra and who, but for the accidental shooting of his horse, would have almost certainly become a millionaire. Christie attempted to keep his workings a secret, an almost impossible task, stated Owen, because 'skilled diggers and prospectors such as Christie are always keenly watched by others of their kind. It was part of the excitement of this exciting game'. (Owen, 1933, p. 76). For some time Christie managed to keep his patch secret. But one moonlit night whilst he was kangaroo hunting, he shot his mousey-coloured horse mistaking it for a kangaroo. As a result he was forced to leave his cache and return to Mallina on foot. On the return journey to his workings Christie was stalked by such a large number of prospectors that he was unable to dodge them all. Owen writes: 'In no time hundreds of men were on the field, which lasted for some years'. (Owen, 1933, p. 77).

Excitement, as Owen records, was in the air of the North-West as anecdotes, myths, and rumours spread through the region, but nothing of this appears in Prichard's text. Bob tirelessly engages in his gold explorations and appears to be quite unaware of the large numbers of hopeful prospectors passing through the region. Hardie recorded:

Prospectors, experienced and inexperienced, travelling with packhorse, camel, bicycle or on foot were tracing their way from the coast up the shady banks of the De Grey and Coongan Rivers to the Bamboo Creek, Marble Bar and Nullagine fields. People left their jobs in the shanty towns of Roebourne, Cossack and Condon to swarm into harsh, unknown territory and join the bushmen and other prospectors in search of their fortunes, to form a motley collection of straggling dusty men in battered felt hats and flannels, carrying their waterbags and swags, picks and long handled shovels or pushing their barrows of dry-blowing shakers. (Hardie, 1981, p. 72).

Bob's failure to take account of either the disappointed miners returning to the ports or the hopeful prospectors crossing the land from one rush to another is all the more surprising as one of Bob's functions in the plot is that of a bearer of information. He turns up at Hugh's mustering camp, and the text states:

Cock-Eye was glad of an invitation to eat and camp with Hugh for the night. Sprawled before the fire, he gave more of the gossip of the countryside, although he had been in the ranges for nearly three months, than Hugh had heard in years. (Prichard, 1929, p. 155).

A hiatus in the 'realistic' presentation of historical background in the text concerns the economic significance of the gold discoveries for the pastoral economy. A brief allusion is contained in the statement: 'If a drover or prospector strayed into Wyaliba there was no whisky'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 27). But this is too unsubstantial to indicate the passage of hundreds of men through the region all of whom were dependent on the local pastoralists for provisions. Turee Station, the prototype Wyaliba, is in fact, quite strategically placed for miners moving between the goldfields in the Pilbara and at Peak Hill. De La Rue noted that the influx of miners into the North-West increased the trade in the area. She stated:

The pastoralists may have, and often did, view this invasion of their domains with dismay, but it did provide them with a means of making some ready money, if only by selling their beef to the miners. Many of the more enterprising pastoralists, whose stations were conveniently located, hopped on the bandwaggon by opening stores and selling flour, tea, tobacco and other commodities to the miners. (De La Rue, 1979, p. 92).

At the end of the 19th century, Bob in the continuing role of gold prospector still hopefully explores the Tomorrow Ranges. The year is about 1898 when Hugh returns from school and is told by Bessie:

'Sam and Bob's been out prospectin', Hugh. Been out a couple of months...

'The gold's there all right,' Bob said, in his thin, nervously sharpened voice. 'We got one good lump, Youie, and scratched about all around. But Sam got the wind up about there being no water and the camels clearin' out. So I reckoned best thing we could do was to come in for stores.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 33).

By this period gold mining had spread throughout the region. The rush to the Pilbarra had died down fairly quickly and the miners moved southwards. J.M. Hooper's text, *Youanmi: a story of Murchison gold* (1987), recorded:

the rivers of the north-western region south of the Pilbara region, the Ashburton River, the Gascoyne River and the Murchison River, were being criss-crossed by prospectors seeking gold. The Ashburton Goldfield was proclaimed in 1890 and the Murchison goldfield in 1891. (Hooper, 1987, p. 10).

The sudden inrush of white miners into areas such as the East Murchison Goldfields, which had previously been unoccupied by white settlers, had devastating consequences for the Aborigines of the district. The Aboriginal situation is summarized by Geoffrey Bolton in 'Black and White after 1897' (1981), which states:



the sparse Aboriginal population was swamped within a few years in the 1890s at the onset of the gold rushes. The miners quickly established themselves by sheer weight of numbers, so that Aboriginal resistance was usually short lived and ineffective. Venereal and other diseases, liquor, and the disruption of their traditional life brought about the breakdown of their society within a few years. (Bolton, 1981, p. 125).

Some Aboriginal resistance to white encroachment did occur and this must have been well-known to the settlers of the region. F.W. P. Cammilleri in 'Experiences on the North-West Goldfields: 1888-92' (1966), recalled that in about March 1892 he had travelled to the Ashburton goldfield. He stated: 'At this time the Ashburton and Hamersley Range blacks, who had a good get-away in the rough country, caused a lot of trouble by spearing two prospectors and also cattle'. (Cammilleri, 1966, p. 61).

But is Bob really unaware of the 'rushes' to the various goldfields that are taking place all around him? At one point the text suggests that he is not. In the early days of Hugh's return to Wytaliba from Perth, about the year 1898, the text makes a statement about Bob to the effect that:

He had ... learnt a good deal, prospecting with old miners round about Nullagine and the Bar. After a while the will-o'-the-wisp gleam of dull metal in dry creek beds, and on the shingly ridges, drew him away from the road and the cattle camps. Bob was haunted by dreams of the gold he would find one day in rich deposits, the fortune he would make. (Prichard, 1929, p. 40).

There is something of a discrepancy between this passage and an earlier reference in the text as well as with the historical situation. The passage states that Bob's gold fever developed following the discoveries of gold in the Nullagine and at Marble Bar, but these fields were not discovered until 1888 and earlier in the text Bob is shown to be possessed by gold fever in 1885. (Prichard, 1929, p. 6). There is no textual evidence of Bob prospecting anywhere but in the To-Morrow ranges during the years after 1885 when the first gold rushes were taking place; although the possibility is not specifically

excluded. On the other hand, Bob is famed for his swaggering lies, in fact, he is known as 'Bob-the-Liar', so that his failure to indulge in far-fetched yarns about either his own or others' spectacular gold finds is a crucial silence in the text.

In terms of the wider historical context, the passage quoted would have more relevance to the era of Prichard's own visit to the North-West region. Owen noted that on the Nullagine field gold appeared for the most part in small leaders and reefs like 'plums in a pudding' but:

When the richest plums had been picked it became a 'tucker-field' to which the diggers returned to feed on the duff. Though the glamour had gone they could always rely on an ounce or more a week. (Owen, 1933, p. 92).

In the first decades of the 20th century Bob's gold explorations continue unabated. In the time span of the novel, the year is about 1913 when Mollie abandons husband and cattle station and goes to live in Perth, taking her five young daughters with her. Hugh is left alone on Wyaliba with the station Aborigines. Three years pass and the text states:

Hugh saw few people but his own blacks.... Cock-Eyed Bob was the only other man to talk to. Bob had been out prospecting in the To-Morrow with two camels and came in to get water and stores now and then. (Prichard, 1929, p. 136).

At one point in the story Bob seems to have had a 'strike': Geary turns up at Wyaliba with a 'tall thin man, a miner, who had been out to inspect Cock-Eyed Bob's claim on the ridge'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 177). But nothing more is heard of the claim.

Bob is still at the fossicking stage when the Banks foreclose on Wyaliba and Hugh is forced to leave the cattle station. Hugh tells Winni:

**'I'm broke... done in...**

**'I'm going out with Cock-Eyed Bob, prospectin' in the To-Morrow.'  
(Prichard, 1929, p. 201).**

**The presence of gold mining in the plot, whilst it serves to build up the economic background of the region, has no significant part in carrying forward the action of the story. This is an issue which is taken up by Harry Heseltine in *Acquainted with the night: studies in classic Australian fiction* (1979). Heseltine suggests that gold prospecting has been included merely to provide an acceptable exit from the text for Hugh. Heseltine notes that inevitably Hugh has to lose the land because 'with Coonardoo lost to him, Wyaliba is also symbolically beyond his power to own'. Heseltine asks:**

**But what is the fictional propriety of sending him off prospecting? - merely to provide, at last, a justification for Cock-Eye Bob's sporadic essays in fossicking which have been written into the tale for no other purpose save that of giving Hughie a way out at the end? (Heseltine, 1979, p. 37).**

**This would seem a reasonable explanation and account for the limited textual details of Bob's gold prospecting excursions. But Heseltine also notes that gold-mining has a symbolic value in Australian texts; that Henry Handel Richardson, in *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony*, 'establishes a symbolic equation between the search for gold and the rape of the harsh mother earth'. (Heseltine, 1979, p. 37). Referring to the tensions in Hugh which can be traced to his relationship with Bessie Watt, Heseltine states that 'Hughie's end' is perhaps more appropriate than Prichard intended in that it brings the 'oedipal experience' into a special relationship with 'a destructive greed for wealth and a rape of the mother earth'. (Heseltine, 1979, p. 38).**

Still with his dream unshattered Bob makes his departure from the text to search for gold in the distant ranges, but no optimistic future lies ahead of Coonardoo. When she returns to the story she is already in the final stages of a fatal infection and has returned to Wyaliba to die.

The narration in the final chapter of the novel like that of the opening chapter follows the thoughts of Coonardoo as she contemplates the world beyond the boundaries of Wyaliba cattle station. The opening scene presents the child Coonardoo, fearfully, reflecting on the unknown world beyond the cattle station. In the final scene, the aged and tremulous Coonardoo, no wiser as a result of her encounter with the external world, ponders its malevolent forces which have caused her devastation but which remain beyond her comprehension.

Coonardoo's primitive conceptual system is a significant feature of her characterisation: a corollary of her creator's Darwinian belief in the inferior evolutionary development of Aborigines. Hodge and Mishra noted that Coonardoo is 'without powers of thought or conceptualization ... intellectually she is not far above a faithful horse or dog'. (Hodge & Mishra, 1990, p. 54). Coonardoo neither understands her experiences in the world beyond the cattle station nor the circumstances which took her there. She can only interpret Hugh's aggressive words to her in their literal sense. When he exiles her from Wyaliba she remains for ever in purdah; obeying to the letter 'his demand that never again should he see her face'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 205). And so she had gone, an automaton, driven by the force of his will: 'Her feet, her legs, her arms and hands had been obedient to him; taken her away'. The text states that no other reason would have separated her from her land and her people, except 'Youie had sent her away'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 205).

So completely does Coonardoo remain beyond the range of Hugh's vision that neither he nor the station Aborigines ever see her again. Occasionally Hugh becomes aware of

rumours that she has been seen. He learns that Monty Blood, 'one of the hardest doers in the Nor'-West, but tender-hearted, by God...' (Prichard, 1929, p. 193), has taken in a badly burned Aboriginal woman and tended her fly-blown wounds, but she disappears whilst Monty is on a spree in Roebourne. Years pass but nothing further is heard of Coonardoo until one day Hugh is in a Roebourne saloon and learns of her whereabouts from the drunken Geary:

'Say, Youie!' he bawled, 'who do you think I saw in the port the other day? Coonardoo! ... The boys tell me she's been hanging around the port this couple of months. Come in on a pearling lugger.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 197).

The theme of the final chapter of the novel, and the resolution of the story, is the devastation of Coonardoo during her encounter with the North-West pearling fleet. In a series of vignettes the text details, retrospectively, Coonardoo's experiences in the pearling industry. Experiences which left nothing of the once 'clean straight aboriginal woman, nothing of her pride and dignity and grace'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 204). The text reflects the historic situation in relation to the treatment of Aborigines, particularly Aboriginal women, in the pearl-shell industry.

The pearl-shell fishing industry in the North-West had a distinctive character and practices which need to be understood in order to fully appreciate the industry's capacity to perform its role as the ultimate destroyer of Prichard's Aboriginal heroine.

At the outset it is important to note that the North-West pearling industry developed out of local conditions, as was noted by Brian Shepherd in his thesis, *A history of the pearling industry off the North-West coast of Australia from its origins until 1916* (1975). Shepherd stated that the North-Western pearling industry 'is not to be seen as an extension of or an aspect of an Australian-wide industry... in its early years in Western Australia pearling developed out of local conditions and its practices owed little to

trends in the industry elsewhere'. (Shepherd, 1975, p. 21).

The pearl-shell fishing industry commenced almost immediately upon the return of F.T. Gregory's North-West exploration expedition which arrived back in Fremantle on 9 November 1861. On board the expedition's survey vessel, *Dolphin*, was a cargo of several tons of pearl shell and a number of pearls. In his report to the Governor on 6 February 1862. Gregory mentioned:

Amongst the natural productions I would first briefly refer to the beds of the pearl oysters, as they are likely to become of immediate commercial importance, considerable numbers having been gathered by the crew of the *Dolphin* at their leisure time, the aggregate value of which, I am told, is between £500 and £600; besides pearls, one of which has been valued by competent persons at £25. The limits of the bed are as yet undefined, but there is good reason to believe, from the position of it, that with proper apparatus ships could soon be loaded with them. (Gregory & Gregory, 1884, p. 96).

It had been known for decades that pearl oyster beds existed on the North-West coast but only a few small pearls had been discovered and pearling, or shelling, had never been considered a commercially worthwhile venture. The size and quality of the *Dolphin's* haul, created immediate interest. To quote W.B. Kimberly: 'a new excitement entered colonial life, and wealth, romance, and inexorable fatalities found fresh adventurous fields of enterprise'. (Kimberly, 1897, p. 214).

Kimberly recorded that the first pearling venture into the Nichol Bay area was made by the firm of Messrs Bateman who had participated in the whaling industry almost from its commencement and who were active in the south-western whaling industry. The Batemans managed to secure the services of James Turner, who had been Gregory's Assistant and Chief of stores on the 1861 expedition. Turner led a party to Nichol Bay with the intention of searching for pearls and pearl-shell.

The party left Fremantle aboard the *Flying Foam* on 15 December 1861 and returned on 9 February 1862. The venture was considered far from successful. Only 910 shells and 150 pearls had been collected and then only with great difficulty. James Turner reported that although numerous beds existed they were widely scattered so that weeks of work had resulted in a meagre harvest. The *Blue Book* gave the value of shells for 1862 as £250. Interest in the pearling industry temporarily abated and no further entry is found in the *W.A. Blue Books* until 1866 when the value of pearl-shell exported was recorded at £7.

When interest in pearl-shelling revived it was centred on the coastal margin and the beaches of the North-West. The foundation of the pearling industry is associated with a legendary figure named Taye, or possibly 'Toye' or 'Tays'. L.C. Burges claimed that he was Taye's employer and that Taye had been in the process of erecting a shed when he observed a group of Aborigines wearing pearl-shell ornaments. Having ascertained from them that pearl banks were to be found at the Nichol River, Taye suggested a partnership to Burges in which the latter supplied the equipment and Taye harvested the shells. Within four days Taye had collected about two tons of dead shell by 'Beach Combing'. After about ten days he had discovered a bank of live shell and requested Burges to purchase a boat. Burges stated:

As luck would have it I was able to purchase a boat from a whaler, to which I was supplying beef, so that Tayes was soon afloat, (Burges, 1913, p. 4).

Taye's shell, valued at over £1000, arrived in Fremantle, and interest was immediately reawakened among the local merchants who saw quick profits to be made; either by visiting the grounds, financing pearling boats, or from making available credit for stores and equipment. In the meantime, Taye, along with over forty other passengers and crew, had met his death on the *Emma* which had sailed from Nichol Bay for Fremantle on 3 March 1867. Burges stated: '47 souls were lost in the *Emma*'. (Burges, 1913, p. 4).

News of Taye's rich harvest also spread throughout the North-West coastal area. The possibility of quick profits from pearling caused many station workers to abandon their pastoral duties in favour of 'shelling'. They were joined by the almost destitute members of failed pastoral ventures who were camped in the Roebourne district and deserting crewmen from ships in the vicinity of Nichol Bay. Pearling became the major occupation of even the prosperous station owners of the district. John Withnell was one settler who saw the value of pearling as a supplement to his income. Nancy Withnell Taylor wrote:

John saw possibilities. He quickly got together Aborigines from the station, rigged out his lighter, and took them to dive in deeper water. Like children they were delighted with the experience and proved expert divers in around seven fathoms. With their quick eyesight and movement they gathered quantities of shell from the bottom of the ocean, stacked it on the beach, bagged it and when a vessel arrived, John dispatched it to Fremantle for shipment overseas. (Taylor, 1980, p. 114).

De La Rue noted that the pastoralists who succeeded in the North-West engaged in a number of different enterprises, notably working for the government, managing additional properties or by investing their money and energy in pearling. This latter was a 'reasonably safe cash crop and pastoralists who could not depend on their wool clip to provide essential finance, could make a tidy sum each year by selling both mother-of-pearl shell, and the pearls themselves'. (De La Rue, 1979, p. 25).

The pearling season in the North-West was from November to March. During the laying off season, March to September, many pearlers who had prospered returned to Fremantle and Perth. J.E. Hammond in his memoirs, *Western pioneers: the battle well fought* (1936), records the importance of the North-Western industries for the population of Fremantle and Perth in the 1860s and 1870s. Large sums were spent on re-equipping for the following pearling season, stores were ordered, ships were repaired. Hammond stated: 'Storekeepers, boat-builders, saw-millers, blacksmiths, ships'



carpenters, sail makers, painters, tailors, butchers, bakers... used to look forward to the coming of the Nor'-Westers'. (Hammond, 1936, p. 58).

The Nor'-Westers also spent 'large sums of money entertaining their friends, enjoying themselves at balls and parties, travelling about the country'. (Hammond, 1936, p. 58). Something of this situation is reflected in Prichard's text in relation to Bessie Watt's visit to Perth where she meets Hugh at the completion of his schooldays and his engineering apprenticeship:

She [Bessie] had taken rooms at the Savoy Hotel while she was in Perth, and entertained all the people who had been kind to Hugh, with eager high-handedness, by way of reaction from the long years of parsimony she had endured for his sake. (Prichard, 1929, p. 54).

This is not, of course, an exact parallel because Bessie Watt's wealth derives solely from her cattle station which has not been subsidised by pearling. But in her presentation of Bessie's encounter with Perth society, Prichard does capture something of the social situation; the dichotomy between the austere existence of the pioneering North-West and the luxurious life of the southern capital. The text depicts the former as honest and vigorous the latter as artificial and effete.

Everything about Bessie bespeaks the long years of struggle for wealth in a harsh and exacting environment. Her clothes are outmoded but practical; she wears an 'old-fashioned black dress with a neat tucker of white net, flat black hat and low-heeled shoes'. A sharp contrast between herself and fashionable Perth women which even she can observe as she talks with 'Hugh's smart friends'. Hugh's fiancée, Jessica Haywood, contemptuously describes Bessie as 'priceless'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 54).

The Bush matron, Bessie Watt, with her down-to-earth speech, she ('swore absent-mindedly'), contrasts with the society matron, Mrs Haywood, whose 'purred' declaration

that Hugh is: 'Quite like one of my own sons!' (Prichard, 1929, p. 55), disguises her insidious manipulations of the marriage market. Unknown to Bessie, Mrs Haywood has, in fact, already engaged her daughter to Hugh. Mrs Haywood's machinations are later disclosed by her daughter, Jessica, when she tells Bessie:

'Mother thought, of course, you were wealthy. All station people have pots of money'. (Prichard, 1929, pp. 52-53).

Jessica expresses an attitude which appears to have been prevalent at the turn of the century. It is an attitude with which A.R.Richardson takes issue, stating:

But the dwellers of cities will say, look at these Nor'-Westers that migrate down annually to spend a few months' holiday in the city of Perth, prosperity and flourishing circumstances written all over them.... but let it not be forgotten also that many of them have borne the burden and heat of the tropical day for periods varying from 15 to 30 years or even longer. (Richardson, 1909, p. 24).

Returning to the historical situation in the North-West, by the mid-1870s the pearling grounds stretched to eighty miles on either side of Nichol Bay. The inshore reefs had become depleted and pearl shell was increasingly only to be found in deeper waters. At this period the close connection between pearling and pastoralism lessened. The pearlers came close to panic in 1876 when it was reported shell prices as low as £100 per ton were being offered on the London market; but simultaneously prices for wool increased. Thereafter, the pastoralists in the Cossack Bay and Roebourne districts became more interested in the profits to be obtained from their land holdings than in pearling. (Shepherd, 1975, p. 27).

The presence in the North-West of the pearling industry, like that of the pastoral industry, had serious consequences for the Aborigines. For the first four years, wrote Mary Bain, in *Full fathom five* (1982), there was reasonable harmony between the pearlers and their Aboriginal divers. In the early years they were the major part of the labour force and their welfare was protected to a certain extent by competition for this

scarce resource amongst employers. Edwin W. Streeter in *Pearls and pearling life* (1886) recorded that the Aborigines were quick to learn to dive and swim and that 'after two seasons an Australian becomes a first-class diver' and that for 'finding shell they cannot be beaten, whilst for powers of endurance an Australian native is unequalled in the world'. (Streeter, 1886, pp. 156-157). Bartlett noted that: 'By the early 'seventies there were 350 natives, excluding women and children, working for 75 master pearlers along the north-west coast'. (Bartlett, 1954, p. 84).

In the early years, Bain reported, the Aboriginal divers were joined by their wives and children who travelled along the coast; the women cleaning the shells, seeking the pearls and hunting for food. Bain wrote: 'Shifting camp often, the Aborigines remained healthy as they lived on clean ground and ate a wide variety of food'. (Bain, 1982, p. 18). Reports of these early days described the Aborigines on board pearling vessels as 'happy' and 'contented' but, Bain noted, they quickly became sullen and morose and developed various complaints possibly as a result of the 'white man's diet' or because they were absent from land. (Bain, 1982, pp. 18-19).

Typically, the diving operation consisted of a number of smallish broad-beamed dinghies, about 14 feet in length, which were centred on a 15 to 18 ton schooner. The dinghies each with about seven or eight Aboriginal divers aboard were under the supervision of a white boss who sculled over the pearling beds whilst the Aborigines dived for shell. Norman Bartlett describes the Aborigines' method of gathering shells:

Their only preparation was to sit on the edge of the boat for several seconds, breathing deeply, before jumping feet first. Below the surface they turned and swam to the bottom, where they seized as many shells as they could before returning to the surface.

In this manner the average skin diver could reach thirty or even fifty feet and stay down anything from half a minute to a full minute. Successful divers threw their shells into the boat, hung on to the gunwale for a short rest and then dived again. Unsuccessful divers were required to bring up a handful of sand or weed to show that they had not been malingering.

**Under exceptionally good conditions the best divers - who were often gins - obtained from sixty to a hundred shells a day. Normally, a boat averaged twenty shells a day. (Bartlett, 1954, pp. 84-85).**

**A.C.V. Bligh, in his memoirs *The golden quest: the roaring days of West Australian gold rushes and life in the pearling industry* (1938), recalled that in the early days the coastal Aborigines were both willing and expert divers but they were soon used up. He noted: 'The men were very keen on anything competitive ... they vied with each other as to the depth they could dive and the amount of shell they could bring up.... The deeper diving took its toll of them, and this generation of young men soon died out'. (Bligh, 1938, p. 35).**

**No legislation regulated the employment of Aboriginal divers and the profit motive inevitably lead to their exploitation. So great was the impetus to gain wealth from shelling, that the overseers on the boats frequently dispensed with the rest periods. Shepherd noted: 'Sometimes even resorting to hitting the natives' fingers with heavy objects as they clung to the gunwale of the boats regaining their breath in order to speed them into the next dive'. (Shepherd, 1975, p. 34).**

**A correspondent to the *Inquirer*, of 28 April, 1875 noted in relation to both Malays and Aborigines:**

**The thirst for shells, for pearls, for success, in fact, brutalises and unchristianizes the pearling speculator or 'driver'. Excitement in the occupation is ever at the stretch from Sunday morn to Sunday morn. No day is respected. No darkman's life is valued in the economising of that life, but the utmost amount of diving must be sucked out of the man, kill him or not; for who knows who will be his owner next season! (*Inquirer*, 28 April 1875).**

**The supply of efficient and healthy Aboriginal divers from the coastal areas was limited and Bligh recalled that:**

To replace them, young men from country further back had to be enlisted. As the country was unsettled and the aboriginals wild, the only method to get them was by means of expeditions. Until they were trained to dive they were kept on the boat and on the islands. (Bligh, 1938, p. 35).

Bligh also noted that the 'method of obtaining this labour is better imagined than described. It is sufficient to say it was crude'. Neville Green recorded that the Government Resident of Roebourne, Lieut.-Col. E.F. Angelo alleged that amongst those implicated in 'black-birding' was a local magistrate who was 'associated with two notorious kidnappers who were openly offering to kidnap Aborigines for the pearlers at £5 a head'. (Green, 1981, p. 106).

The activities of the 'black-birders' resulted in a dangerous situation for whites as well as Aborigines. This aspect of 'black-birding' appears in the novel. Hugh asks Saul Hardy:

'You never went unarmed when you were working along the creeks the pearlers put into, Saul?' (Prichard, 1929, p.105).

Saul shakes his head. He also recalls,

'One crew of Swan Point boys, a pearler I knew black-birded, was so dangerous he had to drive 'em overboard when he got to sea. He and his mate, with loaded guns behind the nigs.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 105).

De La Rue recorded that in the early days of pearling many pearlers were killed by their Aboriginal divers and that 'no traveller was entirely safe from reprisals by Aborigines from the more war-like inland tribes'. (De La Rue, 1979. p. 98).

Bain also noted that there were a number of reprisals made by the Aborigines but mostly they were the sufferers, 'particularly when unsavoury types of employers arrived from distant ports - gaol escapees, ex-whalers, convict ex-pirees and sordid adventurers'. (Bain, 1982, p. 20).

Aboriginal women were also the victims of the 'black-birders'. Protective legislation was necessary to prevent Aboriginal women being forced into 'brothels'. Reports of 'barracoons', slave markets, were frequently made during the 1870s. Barracoons were established on Enderby, de Lambre and Barrow Islands. Susan Hunt recorded: 'In one instance at Enderby Island, for example, there were reports that women were being detailed and "sold to the highest bidder"'. (Hunt, 1986, p. 109).

The two notorious pearlers who were responsible for the barracoon on Enderby Island were tried and convicted by the Government Resident of Roebourne, Robert F. Sholl, who reported the case to the Colonial Secretary in August 1875. Sholl wrote:

Reports were rife that native women were detained on that Island having been conveyed there in boats owned by S. Sustenance, E. Chapman and others...

Deciding that some enquiry was necessary I told Police Sergeant Vincent to hire a boat and go to Enderby Island. He chartered the *Cygnets* on 20th ultimo at £5 per diem, a very high price but he could not make better terms.

He left Cossack the morning of 22nd July, taking with him native prisoner, Bobby, and arrived at Flying Foam passage on the 23rd. Here he found the native women who had been conveyed by boat to Enderby Island.

... Vincent with eight native witnesses then returned to Roebourne on the evening of the 24th.

(PROWA. CSR. ACC.36 vol. 809/113 and 114, 25 August 1875).

Samuel Sustenance was sentenced for three separate offences (carrying native women in boats) and he was fined respectively £10 for the first offence and £5 each upon the other charges with 44/- costs. Edward Chapman was fined £5 and 10/6 costs. Sholl stated that Sustenance had long been an offender but had previously managed to avoid conviction. In a postscript Sholl noted: 'I may as well add that all the women declared they went voluntarily'. (PROWA. CSR. ACC.36. vol. 809/113 and 114, 25 August 1875).

The experiences of the eight Aboriginal women are reflected in the fate of Coonardoo. One of her memories relates to her seizure by the 'black-birders' for enslavement on a pearling vessel:

She shrieked cursing... was being dragged to a little boat on the river... the sea rocked under her, rocked and rocked

'Wiah! Wiah!' Coonardoo wailed. She was screaming again, struggling against the great cruel hands which dragged her and nailed boots that kicked her in the belly. (Prichard, 1929, p. 203).

It was in relation to the abuse of Aboriginal women divers aboard pearling vessels that legislation regulating the employment of Aborigines in the pearling industry was instigated. Pearlery preferred to employ Aboriginal women who were considered to be better divers than Aboriginal men. It was believed that the women had better eyesight and could remain under water longer than the men.

Mary Durack records that Bishop Gibney had witnessed 'women forced to dive even in the later stages of pregnancy, and some whose hands had been crushed with heavy tools for having clung too long between dives to the lugger sides'. (Durack, 1969, p. 16).

The *Pearl Shell Fishery Act, 1871* (WA) specifically dealt with labour agreements and the presence of Aboriginal women aboard pearling vessels.

The Act stated that labour agreements had to be signed in the presence of a Justice of the Peace, or Police Constable. The agreement had to specify the nature, duration and hours of work, the amount of wages or remuneration, and the employer was required to give an undertaking that the Aboriginal diver would be returned to the place at which he was first engaged. (*Pearl Shell Fishery Act, 1871* (WA), s. 2).

**Section 5 dealt specifically with the presence of Aboriginal women on board pearling vessels. It stated that:**

**If any such master, owner, or other person shall carry or allow to embark on board his vessel any female Aboriginal Native... such master, owner, or other person shall for every such offence incur a penalty not exceeding Fifty pounds. (*Pearl Shell Fishery Act, 1871* (WA), s. 5).**

**The novel states that Coonardoo has been 'on a pearling lugger' (Prichard, 1929, p. 197) and that she has been prostituted as 'Pearl, the "black pearl" of a pearler's crew'.**

**(Prichard, 1929, p. 204), These incidents do not accord with the historical situation. In the chronology of the novel Coonardoo reaches Wyaliba in about the year 1928 and she recalls that 'she had crawled ashore from the pearling lugger two or three years ago'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 204). This gives a date for her association with the pearlers sometime between 1922 and 1926. By this period Aboriginal women had been banned from pearling vessels for more than 50 years.**

**It is possible that laws prohibiting Aboriginal women from pearling vessels, were being broken as was revealed in a case reported by Government Resident, E.H. Laurence in May 1884: 'Police v Forrest - carrying a native woman to sea'. The Defendant claimed he was taking the woman as a servant to his brother. The case was to have been adjourned to enable evidence to be produced but the Defendant asked for the case to be dealt with immediately and, as information alleged the woman had been on board for many days, he was fined £5 and costs. (PROWA. CSO. ACC. 388. File 2815/84).**

**The *Pearl Shell Fishery Act, 1871* (WA) did not immediately improve conditions in the pearling fleet and rumours were heard of divers being shot whilst trying to escape from luggers. Shepherd recorded that on one pearling vessel, 'eight Malays... had died early in 1872' from a 'scurvy' like illness and that three Aboriginal divers on board were also discovered to be suffering from scurvy. (Shepherd, 1975, p. 40).**



**The *Pearl Shell Fishing Act, 1871* (WA) was repealed in 1873 when further legislation was enacted which gave more specific form to the regulations of the earlier Act. The new Act required Justices of the Peace and Police Inspectors who witnessed labour contracts to ensure that the Aboriginal employee understood the terms of the agreement and was not being employed under duress; it was also stipulated that the agreement should not exceed 12 months. Further provisions permitted pearling vessels to be boarded by Justices of the Peace, Police or Customs Officers 'for the purpose of observing how the persons employed on or in connection with such ship boat or other vessel are treated'. The Act also required the employer to provide 'a good and sufficient supply of food drink and articles of protection against cold and heat'. (*The Pearl Shell Fishery Regulation Act, 1873* (WA), s. 12).**

With reference to the 'good and sufficient rations and clothing' that pearlers were required to supply to their Aboriginal divers, W.E. Taunton in *Australind: wanderings in Western Australia and the Malay East* (1903), recalls that in the early 'eighties:

If I remember rightly, the form of agreement, which had to be made before a Justice of the Peace, stipulated that each diver was to be found in food, tobacco and the following articles of clothing at the beginning and the termination of the engagement, namely, one cotton shirt, one pair of trousers, one belt, and one handkerchief. There was no remuneration whatever, unless it were a free supply of tobacco during the shelling season. (Taunton, 1903, p. 210).

Breaches of all the regulations occurred and when detected the offenders were prosecuted by the Police or the Inspector of Fisheries on behalf of the Aboriginal Plaintiffs. Numbers of cases were prosecuted during the pearling seasons 1883 and 1884. These were reported to the Colonial Secretary by the Government Resident at Roebourne, E.H. Laurence, in May 1884.

Laurence recorded that a number of assault charges were made against pearlers who had

used rope to beat their Aboriginal divers. Laurence's report stated that the Aborigines made a distinction between employers who 'beat them little' and those who 'beat them much'. In the case of *Police v Hadley*, the Aborigines claimed that 'Hadley beat them little', and he was fined £1 in each of three cases. Hadley's employee, Clifford, was charged with beating three Aborigines and he was fined £2.10.0. in each case because it was claimed he 'beat them much'.

In the case *Inspector v Wilson* - not supplying rations to his natives according to agreement, four cases were taken as a sample. In all there were 33 Aboriginal divers on board and they alleged that they had not been supplied with meat, tea or sugar during the diving season. Wilson asserted that meat had been available in a cask on the deck and the Aborigines were told to 'help themselves and that they were also told to ask for tea and sugar when they wanted it'. The Aborigines denied this. Wilson was fined '£10 each in regard to the 4 cases brought forward'. Laurence also reported: 'The deaths on board this vessel have been rather numerous. I regarded this as a bad - and I hope exceptional - case'.

In further cases Wilson was convicted of employing in diving 4 natives under the age of puberty and was fined £2. 10. 0. on each charge. He also admitted using a rope in assaults on four Aborigines and was cautioned but not fined. The leniency of the sentence, Laurence explained, was occasioned by the fact that the Aborigines claimed he 'beat them little' and also because he had already been heavily fined on the earlier charges.

No leniency was shown in the case of *Inspector v Spencer* - employing a native in diving without the required agreement, and the defendant was fined £10 and costs.

**Resident Magistrate Laurence summarised the cases with the words:**

**His Excellency will observe with satisfaction that the number of cases as compared with the whole number of natives employed is not large, that the assaults were not very serious - no marks being visible on the blacks... It is necessary to show that physical correction is only allowable in extreme cases of insubordination or misconduct, but I am glad to report that I believe it is sparingly used. As to scarcity of food I feel assured it is most exceptional. The Inspector has done good service in detecting these breaches of the law. (PROWA CSO. ACC. 388. File 2815/84, 16 May 1884).**

**In fact, His Excellency, Sir Frederick Napier Broome, was far from satisfied. In relation to Laurence's assertion that physical correction was necessary in cases of insubordination or misconduct, the Governor stated:**

**I cannot admit that it is allowable at all, or that in this matter a native stands in any position different from that of a white man. I hope this will be made clear to all employers by the Resident and the Inspector of Fisheries.**

**Napier Broome regarded the deaths on board the pearling vessel as a very grave state of affairs which demanded the strictest supervision. He stated: 'In conclusion, I am most strongly of opinion that severe notice should be taken of assaults upon natives engaged in diving, and of deprivation of proper rations, or other ill-treatment'. (PROWA. CSO. ACC. 388. File 2815/84).**

**Employment statistics compiled by Lois P. Anderson and presented in her thesis, *The role of Aboriginal and Asian labour in the origin and development of the pearling industry Broome, Western Australian 1862-1940* (1978), show that in the years of the mid-1880s the number of Aborigines engaged in the pearling industry were: 1884, 556; 1885, 549; and 1886, 528. (Anderson, 1978, pp.62-63). After this period and up to 1970 the number of Aborigines employed in the pearling industry each year was less than 100 except for the year 1900 when it reached 119. From the beginning of the 20th century the industry was dominated by large numbers of Malay and Japanese divers.**

The turn around in the industry was occasioned by the move to deepsea dress diving. In the 1890s most of the diving along the western coast was carried out in 15 to 25 fathoms about 25 miles off the western coast in the region of the Eighty Mile Beach. Kimberly stated: 'The pearl fisheries extended further and further into the deep waters. The natives had a superstitious awe of a diver's dress and were not greatly used in deep diving'. (Kimberly, 1897, p. 310).

The text conveys something of the Aborigines' fear of the sea in relation to Coonardoo's encounter with the pearlers which has left her with a dread of the sea. Coonardoo hates 'the sea which was more cruel than anything human'. It is the sea which separates her from 'the earth which still held in its distance her own country and the uloo of her people'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 204). In a 'panic, a frenzy of fear, she had turned her back on the town and the sea'. But even in this intensely moving scene, Prichard cannot forget her evolutionary bias. Rather than showing Coonardoo's actions as rational in that she returns to the only secure place she has ever known, Prichard describes Coonardoo's journey to Wyaliba as being made: 'unconsciously, with the instinct of an animal making for her old feeding grounds, the haunt of her tribe, place of her birth and breeding'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 204).

Lois P. Anderson noted that most of the Aboriginal divers who were released from the pearling industry 'attempted to return to their former way of life but found it an impossible choice'. (Anderson, 1978, p. 22). For these people the alternative had become fringe dwelling in European settlements or in the pearling camps along the coast.

Pearling camps were located in creeks along the northern coast. They were almost deserted during the pearling season but during the laying up period large numbers of pearlers congregated in these settlements to engage in heavy drinking and general

dissipation. A description of one such camp, Broome, which was the centre of the pearling industry at the end of the 19th century, is given by Alexander Macdonald in his published memoirs, *In the land of pearl and gold: a pioneer's wanderings in the back blocks and pearling grounds of Australia and New Guinea* (1907). Macdonald stated:

Broome is the great centre for all pearlers. It is a blistering little settlement, situated on the edge of Roebuck Inlet - a mangrove-lined, salt-water creek ... the population is approximately made up of fifty whites and five hundred of mixed Polynesian race.

Such a proportion, as may be imagined, is a somewhat dangerous one, and it appears all the more so when it is known that the pearlers 'hotels' are but villainous drinking-saloons, run, alas! by one or two unscrupulous white men. (Macdonald, 1907, pp. 290-291).

Frequent violent disputes arose between the races particularly in relation to the abduction of Aboriginal women. The *Inquirer* dated 31 March 1896 recorded that:

Complaints are continually made of the abduction of native women by some of the pearlers, a practice which, if not checked, will lead to hostilities on the part of the black. There is some difficulty, it appears, in obtaining the necessary evidence, but the offenders are known and sooner or later will be punished. (*Inquirer*, 31 March 1896).

The prostitution of Aboriginal women in the pearling camps became a matter of concern during the first years of the 20th century and legislation was enacted to exclude Aboriginal women from the camps. The diseases that were first contracted in the pearling camps became endemic in the North-West during the 20th century.

When Coonardoo returns to the text she is in the final stages of a contagious disease. She has been discovered by Geary who attempts to annoy Hugh with the information:

'And you never saw such an old break-up. Never'd have known her... All in now ... rotten with disease, and booked for the island.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 197).

The question is: What is the nature of the disease Coonardoo has contracted; and to which island is she being transported? There are two possibilities. If the disease is that derived from the name of the goddess Venus, then Coonardoo might be booked for Dorre Island off the coast of Carnarvon but if it is the sickness associated with the Biblical Lazarus, then she is being transferred to Bezout Island off Cossack. Either condition is a possibility: both venereal disease and leprosy were present in the Aboriginal population in the North-West and Kimberleys regions. Both were associated with the pearling crews and with indentured Asian labour and Coonardoo comes off a 'pearling lugger' and she has been 'hanging round the Chinese quarters'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 197).

The disease most closely associated with the prostitution of Aboriginal women to pearling crews, both European and Asian, was venereal disease. This was a major concern of Commissioner Roth on his tour of the North-West. Roth's findings on the subject were included in the *Royal Commission on the Condition of the Natives, 1905, Report and Recommendations*, Section (3) 'Employment of Aboriginal Natives in the Pearl-Shell Fishery and otherwise on Boats'. Roth reported:

Along the whole coast-line extending from a few miles South of La Grange Bay to the Eastern shores of King Sound, drunkenness and prostitution, the former being the prelude to the latter, with consequent loathsome disease, is rife amongst the aborigines. (*Western Australia Votes and Proceedings of Parliament*, 1905, vol. 1. Paper No. 5. p. 11).

It was his contention that the disease was contracted from 'Asiatics'. He stated:

The boats call in at certain creeks, ostensibly for wood and water, and the natives flock to these creeks, the men being perfectly willing to barter their women for gin, tobacco, flour, or rice; the coloured crews to whom they are bartered are mostly Malays, Manillamen, and Japanese; they frequently take the women off to the luggers. (*Western Australia Votes and Proceedings of Parliament*, 1905, vol. 1. Paper No. 5. p. 11).

Commissioner Roth had witnessed these events at La Grange Bay and Beagle Bay where he stated he had seen 'native women at daybreak returning on shore from the boats with presents of rice, etc'.

The Report noted that from the point of view of the pearlers this situation had disastrous economic consequences because:

As the result of their intercourse with aboriginal women, the boats' crews suffer a good deal from venereal disease, and the loss of their labour is severely felt by the pearlers. (*Western Australia Votes and Proceedings of Parliament*, 1905, vol. 1. Paper No. 5. p. 11).

Coonardoo is, in fact, diseased when she comes ashore from a pearling boat. The text states: 'When she had crawled ashore from the pearling lugger two or three years ago she had felt fouled and doomed'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 204).

Roth recommended that areas of the coast be set aside 'where boats only should be allowed to land, but no aborigines to enter, and *vice versa*'. Roth also recommended the chartering of a patrol boat to supervise the areas. (*Western Australia Votes and Proceeding of Parliament*, 1905, vol. 1, No. 5. p. 11).

The subsequent legislation, the *Aborigines Act, 1905* (WA), made specific provision for the exclusion of Aboriginal women from pearling camps. Section 40 stated:

Any female aboriginal who, between sunset and sunrise, is found within two miles of any creek or inlet used by the boats of pearlers or other sea boats shall be guilty of an offence against this Act. (*Aborigines Act, 1905*, (WA), s.40).

Despite Roth's graphic account of the diseased condition of the Aboriginal population, the Act made meagre provision for Aboriginal health. The responsibilities of the Government through the auspices of the Aborigines Department were given in Section 6

(4) and stated to be:

To provide, as far as practicable, for the supply of medical attendance, medicines, rations, and shelter to sick, aged, and infirm aborigines. (*Aborigines Act, 1905 (WA)*, s. 6(4)).

The responsibility of the employer was stated in Section 22 (e) which:

Stipulates for the supply by the employer to the aboriginal or half-caste of substantial, good, and sufficient rations, clothing, and blankets, and also medicines and medical attendance when practicable and necessary. (*Aborigines Act, 1905 (WA)*, s. 22(e)).

Deleted from the 1905 Act was the provision which absolved the employer from providing medical treatment if the 'illness of the Aboriginal be caused by his own improper act or default', as was stated in the 1886 regulations. This is significant because venereal disease was held to be caused by the fault of the Aborigine. On the other hand, in both the case of the Government and the employer, treatment is dependent on 'practicability'. This provision presented those responsible for Aboriginal medical treatment with a convenient way of escaping their liabilities.

The Act also allowed for the setting up of reserves of up to 2,000 acres on Crown land (Section 10) to be administered by superintendents (Section 11) to which they could remove 'any aboriginal' (Section 12). (*Aborigines Act, 1905 (WA)*, ss. 10, 11, 12).

These Sections provided the legal framework for setting up isolation hospitals and for the rounding up and collection of Aborigines suffering from venereal diseases.

Further legislation in 1911 gave the Aborigines Department power to grant reserves over 2,000 acres in size. (*Western Australian Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 39, 1910-11, p. 1326).

Mary Anne Jebb's article, 'The lock hospitals experiment: Europeans, Aborigines and venereal disease' (1984), deals with the detection, isolation and treatment of venereal



disease in Western Australia in the first quarter of the 20th century.

Jebb noted that Aboriginal health had a low priority and was considered to be more of a nuisance than a problem to be solved. Constant disputes arose over the payment of medical accounts between the Aborigines Department, the Medical Department, station owners and doctors. In the meantime, Jebb stated, Aborigines, some as young as a fourteen-year-old girl discovered on Hardey Junction Station, were rotting and dying from venereal disease. (Jebb, 1984, pp. 73-74).

Jebb recorded that in 1906 segregation and isolation of venereally diseased Aborigines was suggested by Dr Arthur Adams of Derby in order to safeguard the public health. Jebb noted that: 'Venereal disease had increased rapidly in the Aboriginal populations east of Carnarvon, Marble Bar and at Laverton'. (Jebb, 1984, p. 74). In 1907 Aborigines in the Onslow district were said to be in a 'deplorable state'. Biskup recorded that in 1907 'the incidence of the disease reached alarming proportions - up to 15 per cent in certain districts'. (Biskup, 1973, p. 112).

From 1906 various medical officers had requested the Aborigines Department to set aside a reserve to separate and isolate diseased Aborigines. The subject was debated in Parliament in 1907 when it was recorded that the Government Inspector, Mr. Isdell, had inspected the whole of the North-West and that:

Venereal diseases amongst the aborigines gave great trouble to the Government: and Bernier and Barrow Island had been temporarily reserved for lock hospitals.... The islands, if found suitable, would be converted into hospitals, and the Medical Department would take over the administration... The lock hospital ought to do good. Venereal diseases could best be prevented by not permitting Asiatics to have access to the natives. The diseases were not confined to the natives of the North-West.... Apparently the condition of the natives was worse than before, and measures should be taken to make the declining years of the natives better. (*Western Australia Parliamentary Debates*, 24 October, 1907, pp. 366-367).

In 1908 two islands west of Carnarvon, Bernier and Dorre were selected as the sites for

Aboriginal lock hospitals; the former was set aside for male and the latter for female patients. 'The first group of inmates arrived in October 1908'. (Biskup, 1973, p. 112).

Peter L. Brown, in *Coast of coral and pearl* (1972), described the method of collecting diseased Aborigines in the area of the Murchison, Gascoyne and Ashburton Rivers. In these districts examination took place at the point of the gun and those showing signs of disease were chained by the neck and force-marched to the coast. These journeys often took several weeks and many deaths occurred along the way. Brown recorded that: 'Flies incessantly buzzed round suppurating sores ... men women and children were mingled and inevitably all were thoroughly cross-infected' by a variety of diseases before the 'miserable survivors' arrived at Carnarvon. (Brown, 1972, pp. 108-109). At Carnarvon they awaited shipment to the isolation islands.

Aboriginal fear of the isolation islands is conveyed in the novel in relation to Coonardoo who regards the island she is being sent to as 'a place of horror beyond the sea'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 204). Geary attempts to rescue her and asks 'Trooper Andrews if there was any chance of getting her away. But he said they were shovin' her off next week'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 197). The extent and nature of the isolation, the power to exclude, is demonstrated by the fact that not even the powerful Geary can succeed against the forces of authority. Noticeably, it is Geary who assumes the responsibility for rescuing Coonardoo. Hugh makes no effort to intervene on her behalf or even to seek her out once he knows she is in the vicinity. The essential weakness of Hugh's character is substantiated in his response to Geary's information about Coonardoo; Hugh literally falls on his face. 'Winni found him lying on his face at the back of the hotel in the early hours of the morning'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 197). Hugh does not tell Winni that Coonardoo has been discovered and Winni continues to search for her, exiting the text with the words: 'I got to find Coonardoo'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 201).

In the historical context, medical officers were instructed to send only chronically ill

syphilitic patients to the isolation islands. It was believed that this condition required a course of treatment over a two-year period and isolation on the islands was necessary to prevent the patients 'absconding' before treatment was complete. On the other hand it was held that gonorrhoea could be treated locally. In practice a variety of diseased patients were sent to the islands as not all doctors could, or attempted to, distinguish between the two conditions.

A description of conditions at the lock hospitals is provided by Daisy Bates, who, late in 1910, had joined the expedition headed by anthropologist, Radcliffe-Brown, to the North-West. Differences developed between Bates and Radcliffe-Brown and they made their separate ways to the lock hospitals. Daisy Bates arrived at Carnarvon on 11 December 1910 and crossed to Dorre Island. In *The passing of the Aborigines* (1938), in a chapter titled 'Isles of the Dead', Bates recalled:

Dorre and Bernier Islands: there is not in all my sad sojourn amongst the last sad people of the primitive Australian race, a memory one-half so tragic or so harrowing, or a name that conjures up such a deplorable picture of misery and horror unalleviated as these two grim and barren Islands of the West Australian coast that for a period, mercifully brief, were the tombs of the living dead. (Bates, 1938, p. 96-97).

There were seventy-seven women on Dorre Island, many of them bed-ridden. I dared not count the graves there. (Bates, 1938, p. 99).

An account of the conditions at the men's lock hospital on Bernier Island is given by Radcliff-Brown's assistant, E.L.Grant Watson in his novel *Where bonds are loosed* (1918). Watson states that Bernier Island consists of a strip of land about 18 miles long by one mile in width. He goes on to say:

The hospital was a very simple building. It consisted of three walls made of tarred canvas and a corrugated iron roof. In it were ten beds. In the beds were sick natives, broken and hopeless pieces of humanity who lay still all day and looked out across the bleak expanse of sand dunes, under which they were destined to be buried, and thought regretfully of their beloved and far-away bush. Some fifteen, who were considered well

enough for hard work, hung about and did odd jobs and waited on those who lay in bed. (Watson, 1918, pp. 31-32).

Whilst at the lock hospitals, Aboriginal patients were treated with 'Salvarsan' which was being successfully used in the white population for the treatment of venereal disease. But Aboriginal patients at the lock hospitals did not respond to 'Salvarsan' treatment and this led to the recognition of their symptoms as indicative of 'ulcerative granuloma' found only in 'natives of the north'. From 1913, when granuloma was alluded to as a specifically Aboriginal disease, admissions to the island lock hospitals decreased sharply until 1918, when the hospitals were transferred to Port Hedland.

In all probability the island for which Coonardoo is 'booked' is Dorre Island and the disease from which she is suffering is granuloma. It is rather less likely, but not impossible, that the disease which is destroying Coonardoo is leprosy. Biskup noted that in 1911 following the discovery of about eight cases of leprosy in the Roebourne district, a 'temporary leprosarium was opened on Bezout Island'. (Biskup, 1973, p. 114).

W.S. Davidson, in *Havens of Refuge: a history of leprosy in Western Australia* (1978), gives the following description of Bezout island:

Bezout is a barren island off Point Samson, about one mile long and a hundred and two hundred yards wide. The only vegetation is scattered spinifex - no water and no firewood. There was however a plentiful supply of turtles, turtle eggs, oysters and fish on which the patients, if they were sufficiently agile, could grow fat. (Davidson, 1978, p. 15).

It was the duty of the local policeman to take fuel, water and stores to the island, which proved difficult in the cyclone season. A total of about seven leprosy cases were sent to Bezout between 1909 and 1912 but after that it lost popularity and a lazaret was set up on a piece of land off Cossack which is an island only at high tide. At low tide it is surrounded by mangrove swamps, which can in places be crossed by wading. The lazaret remained at Cossack until 1931. (Davidson, 1978, p. 13).

In 1924, Dr Cecil Cook, an Australian graduate who held the Wansworth scholarship of the London School of Tropical Medicine, was despatched to the North-West and Kimberley regions to study and report on the incidents of leprosy in these districts. Dr Cook took the opportunity to study both leprosy and granuloma in the Aboriginal population.

Dr Cecil Cook was concerned to note that the whites believed they were immune to granuloma. He reported:

Whites are commonly believed in Kimberley [sic] to be for some obscure reason immune to 'Dog Syphilis'. 'Nigger Pox', 'Soft Chancre', as Granuloma is variously termed there. This is a dangerous and erroneous impression as Granuloma has long been known amongst sailors and other whites on the China Station and is common amongst the mixed White races of Latin America. (PROWA. PHD. ACC. 1003. File 888/23).

The area visited by Dr Cook stretched from Carnarvon to Broome and included the Nullagine, Shark Bay, the Tableland, Marble Bar, and Halls Creek. The estimated Aboriginal population of the region was listed as:

10 172, Full-blood;  
425, Half-caste deemed to be Aboriginal;  
182, Half-caste not deemed Aboriginal;  
10 000 (estimated) Aborigines outside the influence of civilisation.  
A total population estimated at 20,779.

Of these Dr Cook examined some 2 306 Aborigines and discovered four new cases of leprosy and a suspected two others. He found 84 cases of Granuloma (46 males and 38 females) or 3.64% of those examined. (PROWA. PHD. ACC.1003. File 888/23).

Cook stated that the four cases of leprosy all seemed to be related and were confined to the coastal area. He expressed the opinion that there were no cases of leprosy among

the 'wild natives in the interior'. (PROWA. PHD. ACC.1003. File 888/23).

The coastal area is the site of Coonardoo's wandering after she leaves Monty Blood. Geary informs Hugh that: 'They say she's been up and down the coast for years.' He also states. 'The boys tell me, she's been hanging around the port this couple of months.' (Prichard, 1929, p. 197). In either case she could have been in contact with leprosy sufferers.

Dr Cecil Cook prefaced his report on Leprosy with the words: 'Leprosy is one of the most terrible diseases to which the Human Race is susceptible... to the advanced case death would often be a mercy'. (PROWA. PHD. ACC. 1003. File 888/23).

Although the method of transmission of leprosy is not clear, it is usually, but not invariably, contracted after prolonged physical contact with an infected person. Dr Cook observed that conditions in North Western Australia were suitable to the spread of leprosy. He noted that: 'Amongst the whites the squalor of the Far North Camp will give ample opportunity for the requisite intimacy of contact between Leper and susceptible'. Coonardoo could have acquired the disease in the pearling camp with its 'stench of pearlmen and the close horrible places they live in'. Here she has been in close contact with 'men whose faces were like corned meat, skin white beneath their filthy shirts and trousers; yellow men with small slant eyes'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 203).

Coonardoo's symptoms so far as they are given are not consistent with leprosy, which in its final stages is characterised by the destruction of the peripheral nerves which can result in the extremities becoming deformed and falling off. Davidson records the case of the Aborigine who was reported to have neural leprosy. 'He was reputed to be a bit of a wanderer and appears to have roamed around for years after diagnosis suffering from anaesthesia of his feet and gradual loss of his toes'. (Davidson, 1978, p. 8). Coonardoo still has her 'scrawny hands' and although her 'feet were broken with festering sores' this

was caused by her 'long rough journey' back to Wyaliba from the coast rather than the progression of her disease. (Prichard, 1929, pp. 202-203). Of course, in the final paragraph there is a possibility that she has physically disintegrated. The text states: 'Her arms and legs, falling apart, looked like those blackened and broken sticks beside the fire'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 206). But it is not probable that Prichard is describing a scene in which her heroine's limbs have actually become detached from her body; this would be grotesque rather than tragic.

As noted above, it is more likely that Coonardoo is suffering from venereal disease, in all probability granuloma. In the later stages of the disease death often occurs due to extensive destruction of tissue (Jebb, 1984, p. 76). In the final stages of Coonardoo's illness the text states: 'Her body was weakening and rotting away from her'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 204), and her arms are said to be 'showing the bone through'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 203).

Although the nature of Coonardoo's disease remains a matter of speculation, perhaps there is significance in the fact that Prichard's text is nonspecific in relation to it. This could indicate that it was such that its identification would offend the sensibilities of the *Bulletin's* readership. If this were the case, then a reference to a venereally communicable disease was more likely to cause affront to readers of the serial than an allusion to leprosy.

The incorporation of goldmining and pearl-shell fishing into the background of the novel completes Prichard's representation of European economic activity in the North-West region. These two industries function in the text to bring into view the world beyond the closed community of Wyaliba cattle station. In the text, as in the historical situation, the external world operates differentially in the case of the white settler and the Aboriginal people. For Hugh, when his pastoral enterprise fails, the unlimited resources of the land are still available for exploitation and he sets out on a gold

prospecting expedition. For the Aborigines there is no alternative lifestyle; pastoralisation has destroyed their traditional economy and when the cattle station fails they must enter a world in which they have no future. In the final chapter of the novel they have simply vanished from the landscape.

Emblematic of the Aborigines' fate in the external world is the exploitation and devastation of Coonardoo in the pearl-shell fishing industry. In the final scene of the novel, alone and diseased, she returns to the deserted cattle station to fade into the landscape: 'She crooned a moment, and lay back. Her arms and legs falling apart, looked like those blackened and broken sticks beside the fire'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 206).



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

It would, perhaps, be relevant here to refer to Stephen Greenblatt's statement in regard to the value of new historicism in the recovery and representation of the past. Greenblatt noted:

It is paradoxical, of course, to seek the living will of the dead in fictions, in places where there was no live bodily being to begin with. But those who love literature tend to find more intensity in simulations - in the formal, self-conscious miming of life - than in any of the other textual traces left by the dead. (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 1).

*Coonardoo*, whilst not devoid of ahistoricisms, has performed this task; it represents adequately the physical geography and the socio-cultural and economic elements of the era and region of its setting. Thus it provides both an experience of, and an entrance to, the historical situation in the North-West during the first 60 years of white settlement.

Although, in the present work, it has been suggested that Prichard's sketches of natural surroundings are not entirely authentic in relation to the North-West region, it is conceded that Prichard's intention is literary rather than factual in this particular dimension of the novel. It is acknowledged that descriptions of geographical and environmental features in the text provide the appropriate background for the presentation of the primary industries which developed in the region; which is a central dimension of the text.

Of these primary industries, the most significant and extensively represented in the novel, is the pastoral industry. The history and development of the region's pastoral industry during the period mid-1860s to late 1920s has been reconstructed in the thesis in relation to the situations and experiences of the owners of the fictional cattle station, Wyaliba, the site of almost all the action of the story. The links between Wyaliba and

the historical Turee Station are explored in some detail. The thesis discussed the twofold aspect of the pastoralisation process: the foundation, development and maintenance of pastoral enterprises by the white settlers; and the colonisation process which disrupted Aboriginal traditional economic, social and cultural practices. These aspects of white settlement are discussed in relation to their representation in the novel and historical information contained in journals, memoirs and newspapers.

An aspect of the colonisation process which is featured in *Coonardoo*, is the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women in the pastoral industry and this has been dealt with in some depth in the thesis: both in relation to its representation in the novel and as it occurred in the wider historical context. Prichard claimed that: 'The motive of the book was to draw attention to the abuse of Aboriginal women by white men - a subject that demanded immediate attention' (Irwin, 1956, p. 31), which could imply that *Coonardoo* was instrumental in instigating legal protection for Aboriginal women, but such a claim is contravened by evidence taken from the historical situation. From early in the settlement period, legislative measures had sought to address aspects of this particular problem and it was specifically dealt with in the 1905 Aborigines Act. Although, of course, it is acknowledged that legislation was not always effective or upheld. On the other hand, this thesis has shown that social pressures in the white community exercised a certain degree of control in regard to this situation.

Although, in the 'Introduction' to the novel, Prichard made a specific claim to first-hand knowledge of the Aboriginal traditional forms she describes in *Coonardoo*, these patterns had disappeared before she carried out her fieldwork in the North-West. The Aboriginal socio-linguistic groups encountered by Prichard in 1926 had long been displaced from their traditional homelands. Neither Prichard nor her white contemporaries were aware of the significance of specific stretches of territory to the ritual activity of the Aborigines, the performance of which was essential for maintaining their links to the Dreamtime. Prichard had been privileged to witness an Aboriginal

corroboree but, possibly, this was the extent of her contact with Aboriginal artistic and ceremonial activity. Thus Aboriginal socio-cultural and religious forms in the novel are represented at a fairly superficial level. Additionally, these practices are based on the work of the ethnologist-anthropologist, Herbert Basedow, and refer to the customs of Aboriginal socio-linguistic groups of Central Australia which are not necessarily relevant to groups associated with North-West, Western Australia.

The thesis demonstrated that every intrusion of Europeans into the North-West had a deleterious effect on the Aborigines of the region. The influx of prospectors and goldminers into the area placed a strain on the environment and on the Aboriginal hunting-gathering economy with consequent dislocation of the indigenous groups. The pearl-shell fishing industry had its own pernicious effect on the Aborigines, particularly Aboriginal women, when they were prostituted to the pearling crews and as a result suffered from a number of contagious diseases, notably, venereal disease and leprosy.

In the novel, the failure of the Watt pastoral enterprise is doubly disastrous for the Aborigines of Wyaliba: they are no longer maintained by the cattle station and they cannot revert to their traditional economic forms as the land has been destroyed by the pastoralisation process. In symbolic terms, the failure demonstrates the fate of the Aboriginal people in the 'real life' situation: at the end of the story the Aborigines have vanished from the land.

Greenblatt's premise that fictional simulations provide a greater intensity 'than any other textual traces left by the dead' (Greenblatt, 1988, p. 1), has particular significance in relation to Coonardoo and her circumstances. Her ill-treatment and rejection by Hugh, her sexual abuse by the pearlers and her lonely death, reach the emotions of the reader and have the power to excite pity for the 'real life' Aboriginal women who were exploited by white men. But this is an emotional reaction which is not unambiguously valuable, as Lyndall Hadow noted:

The picture of *Coonardoo* is flawed. It leads the reader not to an identification with a fellow victim but to pity. This is an emotion in us that the Aboriginal woman needs as little as she needs patronage, sentimentality, or do-gooding. (Hadow, *Tribune*, 4 March, 1975).

Perhaps the most startling revelation of the present investigation has been the dichotomy it revealed between the author's stated social conscience, her support of the oppressed people of her own society, and her failure to offer any solution to the problem of Aboriginal oppression and extinction. Aileen Palmer noted in relation to *Coonardoo*: 'In the tenderness and sympathy of its telling... the author herself draws no moral, makes no accusation'. (Palmer, 1958, p. 28). Far from condemning the oppressive system in the pastoral industry, which is reflected in the novel, Prichard's 'Introduction' appears to accept the status quo in relation to the white and Aboriginal relationships. She stated that 'on isolated stations of the Nor'-West ... they are treated with consideration and kindness'. (Prichard, 1929, p.v).

A significant feature of Prichard's text is that it captures the moment of collision between two historical movements: the linear-progressivism of European civilisation and the cyclical-statism of Aboriginal culture. European culture which valorizes continuous economic development is portrayed in the operations of the pastoral, goldmining, and pearl-shell fishing industries. Aboriginal socio-cultural practices which maintain universal forces intact in an eternally recurring unalterable system of birth-life-death-rebirth are also represented, although inadequately, in the text. The novel shows quite distinctly that the encounter between these two opposed ontologies leads inevitably to the extinction of the system which makes no provision for change; Aboriginal culture falls to the forces of European progressivism. The demise of the Aborigines and their society is conveyed figuratively when in death

Coonardoo disappears into the landscape: 'Her arms and legs, falling apart, looked like those blackened and broken sticks beside the fire'. (Prichard, 1929, p. 206).

Finally, referring to the value of Katharine Susannah Prichard's *Coonardoo* as a social and a cultural artifact, I should like to make reference to the view of Prichard's son, Ric Throssell. In a letter dated 15 October 1996, to the present writer, Ric Throssell stated that *Coonardoo*:

will have in the future a very considerable effect on Australian social history. Katharine's work is almost always based upon factual origins, personally researched by K.S.P. herself. She said it was due to her early training as a journalist. (Appendix 3).

Indeed, a number of issues raised in the text of *Coonardoo* are deserving of further investigation. Of particular interest, is the theme of miscegenation and the inheritance rights of part-Aborigines. The novel provides a useful focus for a specific exploration of sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women in the pastoral and other industries in the text.

An area deserving further investigation by historians is the economic development of pastoral stations in the North-West: from alienation of the land to viable enterprise. The history of pastoral expansion in the region as well as the history of other industries mentioned in the text, would make useful themes for more specific examination.

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**APPENDIX 1**  
**TELEPHONE INTERVIEW**  
**WITH**  
**DR RICHARD JAMES MAGUIRE**

June 1996

Telephone conversation with Dr. Richard James Maguire, son of Joseph James Maguire of Turee Station.

Dr Maguire confirms that he was about 7 years old and had been on Turee Station during Katharine Susannah Prichard's visit there.

*Was Mrs Doris Maguire the friend who told Prichard the story of the abandoned Aboriginal baby?*

'I know nothing about that. It wasn't Topsy because she kept all her children.

'The children of Topsy and Duck were: daughters, Cooboo and Coomby; and sons, Jerry and Moonga.'

*Did Prichard and Mrs Maguire keep in touch after Prichard's visit to Turee Station?*

'Yes, they kept in touch for many years. I stayed at Greenmount three or four times. I spent many weeks at Greenmount when I was 14 or 15 years old.

'I remember Hugo Throssell. He was larger than life - a real man. Or so it seemed to me: I was only 8, 9, or 10 at the time. He showed me all sorts of guns, military guns and medals. I remember being shown pistols that he had brought home from the war. He taught me to play billiards.'

*Can you tell me anything of the history of Turee Station?*

'My father came from Queensland, from the Toowoomba area, I think. He went to the Kalgoorlie area. Like all the young men of the time, he was seeking a fortune in gold; but he gave up after a couple of weeks.

'Then he moved north to the 'backend'. He worked around Meekathara, and the Gascoyne, finishing up in the Rocklea area. He had a very small block, after a couple of years he met up with a young chap, Piesse, who had a patch next to him and they made an agreement to join forces. This was about 1905/6. They never ever had a formal agreement and they never ever had an argument. Piesse went to World War I but my father decided to stay in the area of the present Turee Creek station.

'After World War I, Piesse decided not go back to the area but stayed in the Guildford region and had a flower farm.

**'But they remained in partnership for many years, although there was never a formal agreement.'**

***How did they acquire their initial stock for the station?***

**'Well, they bought a few, they worked for a few, and some were given them, and others they found wandering about.'**

**'There were no formal agreements until 1913-14. The first lot of figures show there were about 1300-1400 head of cattle by 1913.'**

**'My father and Piesse started at the bottom end of the run in the Rocklea area and they gradually worked their way along the Ashburton and Turee Creek. They had a group of natives working for them and in their transmission from the west end of the station they brought the various groups with them who were camped in the area. Eventually they all became part of the station; living on the banks of the Creek. There were about 40 or fifty of them and, ultimately, 60 including pensioners.'**

***Were there any traditional Inawongga or Ngarlawongga living on the station land when the Leases were first taken up?***

**'I doubt very much that natives were living there at all.'**

**'There were no natives who had been born and bred on the station. There may have been Aborigines in their early teens or children of the early arrivals who might claim such a relationship.'**

***Did you know the names 'Inawongga', or 'Ngarlawongga' the traditional groups of the Turee area. Were there any Inawonggas or Ngarlawonggas on the station in 1926?***

**'I don't recall the names. But it was a long time ago.'**

**'The natives did not constitute a 'tribe' but for about fifty miles they were of the same general pattern.'**

**'On the station there were about 40 or 50 Aborigines and ultimately about 60 including pensioners, etc. Just after the war, in about the 1960s, something dramatic happened which cleared the Aborigines off the land. I can't recall what it was - someone blew a whistle and they went on strike or were sacked and everything changed. Not all at once but gradually they went on down - to drink, etc.'**

**[There were no natives on Turee since about 1960s].**

***Did Prichard witness any traditional Aboriginal customs while she was on the station?***

**'My father asked the official boss, Duck and the High lady, Topsy, to turn on a corroboree on one evening for Mrs Throssell. The men came up and tramped up and down. Showed her how the kangaroos jumped around. She would have been shown some of the rituals.'**

**'Part of the time the Aborigines held 'Pink-eye' at a camp on the river about 30 to 40 miles away where they carried out their tribal arrangements; to which they invite their neighbours. But not initiations any more: not that I knew about.'**

***With regard to the prototype of Coonardoo: could she have been Topsy, whose tribal name was 'Kundri' and who was the wife of Duck?***

**'I always thought Topsy was the heroine. I've no proof. I just assumed so as she is like Topsy. Not of course, in the last part.**

**'Topsy was very kind. She looked after me. She was the High Lady of the tribe. Duck was boss of the place. He took over when the old fellows gave up traditional work.'**

***Was she the same Topsy who went with her husband and baby on holiday to Queensland with J. Brown the Manager in 1923? Was this an indication of the family's affection for the Aboriginal couple? Was it a holiday or had the Aborigines been taken along to do the cooking?***

**'It was a holiday. They were civilised and at home with whites - within reason.**

**'I went on the holiday. We went by train.**

**'I doubt if she did any cooking on the homestead. She cooked on camp on fires - she could brew salt meat - but the white women did most of the cooking at the homestead.'**

***Coonardoo is portrayed as excessively shy and almost inarticulate. Would this have been the case with Topsy?***

**No: novelist's licence.**

**'I was 3 or 4 when we went across to Brisbane - Topsy had two children. She was in her late 20s or early 30s.'**

***Is it possible Duck was the model for Coonardoo's husband, Warieda?***

**'I don't know.'**

***Were there any white stockmen on Turee Station?***

**'There was Paul O'Brien who was a half-caste. There was always one or two white men. Father was boss of the camp. Whites were put in charge of camps. They were not the best workers but had the authority of being white.'**

***Was it usual to use the term 'gin' for Aboriginal women at that time? Did it cause any resentment from the Aborigines?***

**'Gin was the usual term. I don't think they would be insulted or anything of that fashion. There was nothing insulting about it: the terms for Aboriginal male was 'man' - Gin and**

**Man.**

**The Aborigines at that time wanted to do their jobs about the station. If any of the younger men didn't want to work they would be sent off. Not immediately, they tended to be sent to Duck first and he would have a word with them - no-one got thrashed.**

**They were established on the station: Tumbler, wandered down and round the Murchison and back up to Turee. He married Kubu, Topsy's daughter.'**

***Did Prichard go on a ten-day muster with the men of the station as she claimed she would?***

**'I doubt a ten-day trip. Might be a couple of days but not more than about ten miles.'**

***Could you tell me something about Brumby Leake?***

**'Brumby Leake was a professional 'borrower'. He was very good-hearted and if someone fell down, he'd tell them they were a 'bloody fool' and pull them up without saying anything more about it. He lived with the natives. He might have had native blood himself. Brumby was part of the folklore. He was an old villain - illiterate. He brought his mail over to father for him to read and tell him what to do. Brumby was in the area and survived a long time after Prichard was there.'**

***Does the Maguire family still own Turee Creek Station?***

**'We own about 640 acres. We still lease about 900,000 acres. It is managed by my younger son.'**

***Did Peter Bondini of Prairie Downs take over Turee Station?***

**'No just one block. It was about 50-60,000 acres. It was not developed in any way and there was no point in paying the annual rent. It shared a boundary with Prairie Downs and when Peter Bondini asked if he could have it, I said "Yes".'**

***What was your opinion of 'Coonardoo' when you read it?***

**'I am sure a lot of it was invention. It was more what the situation hopefully should be than what it was.'**

**The situation on Turee Station was the ordinary pattern of people at that particular time.'**

**APPENDIX 2**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS**

**EXTRACT FROM LETTER**

**DATED 23 May 1995**

**Ref: 91002**

I enclose a copy of 2 maps, one produced by Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre and the other by Norman Tindale. It must be noted that many of the boundaries and names on this latter map may be unreliable.

As far as I know, the Yinhawangka (Inawongga) and Ngarla (Ngarlawongga) socio-linguistic groups traditionally occupied the Turee Creek area. However, as you can see, there is a very large area north and west of Turee Creek which also fits your description of "between the Fortescue and Ashburton Rivers". The mention of ranges implies an inland area.

Groups which occupied the area immediately south of the Fortescue include the Marduthunira (Mardudunera), whose name refers to the Fortescue's lower reaches. The Marduthunira occupied much of the Robe River and were probably 'lowland' people, the Western edge of the Hamersley Ranges being the territory of the Kurrama (Gurama), whose country also falls into your area. On Tindale's map the group 'Jadira' may refer to a sub-group of the Marduthunira.

Further upstream the Fortescue falls into Yindjibarndi (Indjibandi) territory, generally defined as the tablelands of the Chichester Ranges. The north eastern part of the Hamersley Range is spoken for by the Banjima (Pandjima) group.

North of and along the Ashburton, groups include the Nhuwala (Noala), Thalanyji (Talandji), Pinikura (Binigura), Thiinpa (Tenma) and Jurruru (Tjururu) groups, with the Yinhawangka & Ngarla at the river's upper reaches. Apart from the Thalanyji, Yinhawangka and Ngarla, there are now few if any speakers of these languages, and details are very difficult to obtain.

Members of the groups mentioned now live mainly in Roebourne and Onslow, although there are some communities in the homelands.

Signed: Diana MacCallum  
Assistant Heritage Officer  
Northern Sub Regional Office

### **APPENDIX 3**

**RIC THROSSELL**

**EXTRACT FROM LETTER**

**DATED 15 CTOBER 1996**

It is true that Katharine had extensive personal knowledge of the region and that she may well have drawn on the notes about her earlier experience recorded in her notebooks and that very early series of stories about her days as a Governess in the outback. Her notebooks were very often the source of material used very much later. You will find references to 'Working Bu''ocks' in 'Black Opal' for example.

'Topsy' was indeed the model for much of the characterisation of Coonardoo. There are photographs of her in the red albums annotated in Katharine's writing 'A girl like Coonardoo'. And she says in the introduction that Coonardoo was a woman she knew - 'except in the end' which was someone else's story. Most fictional characters, hers and mine, are based upon a number of real people, with a bit of imagined invention. It is a writer's devise that is very often misunderstood by those who find a point of identification in a novel and take it that the whole fictional character is based upon one live model.

'Haxby's Circus' (Fays Circus, she called it) was postponed, not 'abandoned' for 'Coonardoo', of course. It is still in print and was adapted as a stage play by the South Australian theatre company at the end of last year. The first act triumphantly, the second rather less successful.

I agree with your analysis of 'Coonardoo' as a work of fiction - but it had, and will have in the future a very considerable effect on Australian social history, Katharine's work is almost always based upon factual origins, personally researched by K.S.P. herself. She said it was due to her early training as a journalist.

Signed: Ric Throssell.